

VISION ACCOMPLISHED:  
HOW PROFESSIONAL WOMEN LEARNED TO RECREATE  
THEIR CAREERS AND FIND PERSONAL FULFILMENT

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in  
Teachers College, Columbia University

2021

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## ABSTRACT

### VISION ACCOMPLISHED: HOW PROFESSIONAL WOMEN LEARNED TO RECREATE THEIR CAREERS AND FIND PERSONAL FULFILMENT

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Women account for half of a country's potential talent base and numerous studies have shown that women's participation in the workplace provides the nation with considerable competitiveness. Yet, despite an increasing breadth of educational and work opportunities, research has shown that women are more unhappy than they were in the 1970s. Some women, however, have made the successful and determined effort to seek fulfillment by voluntarily leaving an organization, pursuing their personal vision, and transitioning to their desired reality.

This qualitative case study explored how 24 college-educated women learned to recreate their careers and find personal fulfillment. The purpose of this study was to understand how some women voluntarily left secured positions and how they applied the concept of a personal vision to transition to what was for them, a new desired reality. Personal vision is defined by Boyatzis et al. (2019) as an expression of an individual's ideal self, expressing someone's aspirations, dreams, and ambitions.

The sample was a purposeful one. The primary method of data collection was participant semi-structured interviews. The second source of data was a group of six women with a personal vision who had not yet made the transition to their desired reality. The third source of data was

document review, including CVs, LinkedIn, and social media accounts for cross-reference checking. The data was initially coded by research questions and the findings were coded by behavioral categories derived from the Conceptual Framework.

Four conclusions emerged from the analysis. These include confirmation that women need to be motivated in order to achieve personal fulfillment, personal issues must be reconciled before women can begin their transition from an established situation to their desired reality, informal learning methods are key in helping women make their transition, and transitioning to a desired reality is unlikely without the support from others.

Several recommendations for future research as well as recommendations for individuals, coaches, HR Practitioners and women's networks and organizations are offered.

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mum, Sybil Shearer.  
You moved heaven and earth and paved the way for me to live this glorious journey that is life.  
You continue to inspire me daily.  
Thank you for giving me access to the universe.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At times overwhelming, this doctoral journey has been life changing. I am eternally grateful for the privilege of having had the opportunity to pursue this research. None of this would be possible without the people that surrounded me along this journey.

Thank you to my late grandmother “nanny” Lillybelle Green who bravely followed her vision of a better life and left Jamaica in the 1950’s to sail to a country she had never known. Today, as the first woman in my family to have a college education, I am a reminder that extraordinary things result from one single decision.

To my husband, Bodo. This journey started with you. You encouraged me to apply to this doctoral program. You stood by me steadily, patiently, and tirelessly and made it quite literally possible for me to stay the course, through all the highs and countless lows. You gave me the gift of space and time, you infused our days with much needed humor when I could see none. We did it. I love you.

To my besties, friends and family, your raucous cheers were welcome. I am eternally grateful for having you in my life and for patiently waiting for me to resurface. Writing a doctorate is a lonely and often isolating road, the sideline encouragement truly kept me going every single day.

To Dr. Marie Volpe, you are a force of nature and your guidance, unwavering support, and love made this possible. My cup overfloweth with gratitude. To have you as my advisor was a gift from the stars.

To Dr. Lyle Yorks and Dr. Victoria Marsick, thank you so very much for your advice, guidance, and encouragement.

To my AEGIS fellows in this doctoral program at Columbia, it has been my greatest joy and honor to be a member of this community. Nicholas Pelzer, my accountability partner, thank you for being my pace keeper. Melinda Starmer, thank you for your encouraging support and our lunch time getaways.

Rochelle Herring, thank you for getting me to a-ha during Chapter II.

An enormous thank you to the extraordinary women who generously participated in my study and shared their journeys. You embody what is possible. Thank you for allowing me to share your stories and inspire others to follow their dreams.

This is for anyone who has a dream in the making. May you surround yourself with people who hand you back your dreams with encouragement.

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Background and Context

Women account for half of a country's potential talent base and numerous studies have shown that women's active participation in the workplace provides a nation with considerable competitiveness. An increase in access to education in particular has resulted in approximately half of the economic growth in OECD countries in the last 50 years (IMF report, 2021). In the United States, women currently control an extraordinary amount of wealth, and it is projected that they will control two-thirds of the nation's wealth by year 2030 (Ettinger & O'Connor, 2011). It is also estimated that "95% of families will have a woman as the primary financial decision maker at some point in their lives" (Prudential Research Study, 2010-2011). As pointed out by *New York Times* reporter Claire Cain Miller (2020), "American women hold more payroll jobs than men," and their success in the labor market has been propelled by their educational advances.

Yet, despite an ever-increasing number of women in the workplace, a study conducted by Stevenson and Wolfers (2009) found that measures of subjective well-being revealed women are more unhappy today than they were in the 1970s. The decline in happiness among U.S. women was found to occur, regardless of "age, marital, labor market, or fertility status" (p. 19). Possible reasons included socioeconomic factors playing out unfavorably for women; satisfaction covering a broader field besides the home; women possibly being more at ease sharing their levels of satisfaction than in previous years; and the fact that increased opportunities may have inflated women's perception of what constitutes individual happiness (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009).

Marcus Buckingham's (2009) blog in *Huffington Post*, entitled "What's Happening to Women's Happiness," outlined that over one million individuals in developing countries had been surveyed over the last 40 years. The data on happiness pointed to the same findings: "greater educational, political, and employment opportunities have corresponded to decreases in life happiness for women, as compared to men."

According to Lisa Belkin's (2003) "The Opt-Out Revolution," published in *The New York Times*, "*Fortune* magazine found that of the 108 women appearing on its list of top 50 most powerful women over the years, at least 20 chose to leave their high-powered jobs, most voluntarily, for lives that are less intense and more fulfilling." Similar research found that "women [were] more likely to leave their high salaried, high-level positions because, as they put it, 'it's not worth it'" (Helgesen & Goldsmith, 2018, p. 14). Anne Petherik (2016), in an online issue of *The Guardian*, commented that with the increase of opportunities and choices, women in "industrialized countries have internalized ever more complex and optimistic expectations, and judged reality against these."

A breadth of options for women may have led to the impression that they have not lived up to the opportunities at hand and that, consequently, this increased pressure has come at the cost of individual well-being (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009). Indeed, the surge of options has not necessarily diminished the mental/emotional pressure and physical energy of managing a household. The UN Women's Gender Equality 2020 report underscored that women spend three times as many hours as men in unpaid care and domestic work, limiting their access to decent work. This labor, such as child-rearing, home chores, and so on, has often gone unnoticed by spouses, partners, and scholars due to its "invisible nature" (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). Yet, invisible labor can have significant ramifications on women's well-being and feelings of

fulfilment (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Offer, 2014). Offer (2014) noted that “concerns about family matters require the expenditure of considerable time and energy [and] often take a heavy toll on parents’, especially mothers’, emotional well-being [; thus,] this type of mental labor remains highly invisible and is usually taken for granted even to those involved” (p. 919).

According to Stickel and Bonett (1991), women have opted for traditional careers due to the expected challenge of juggling careers and family responsibilities. Consequently, in many instances, women are faced with having to reckon with their lifestyle choices. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) expressed that “women...not only [consider] the impact of their decisions on others, but also whether their choices [are] true to who they are, their vision for work/ nonwork balance, and their need for challenging work” (p. 8). They further found that women “tend to simultaneously focus on the context of relationships throughout their lives, considering all three parameters—authenticity, balance, and challenge—of the kaleidoscope model at each personal decision point before making any life-changing decisions” (p. 11).

Research undertaken by Belenky et al. (1986) focused on the psychological development of women, their beliefs and how they make meaning of truth, and their knowledge and authority through five epistemological perspectives that each play into the development of women’s self, voice, and mind. The authors noted that environments providing the most supportive and encouraging learning experience for women were those that promoted connected teaching in relationship with others, where “they frequently mentioned knowledge obtained by observing the self as well as observing others” (p. 85). These settings not only afforded women the possibility to explore and discover their own voice; they also meant that when they were in a position to integrate their subjective and procedural types of knowledge, they were able to form their own beliefs, thereby enabling them to become independent critical thinkers. Buse and Bilimoria



(2014) also underscored that women who persisted in their field “had a personal vision that enabled them to overcome the bias, barriers and discrimination in the...workplace” (p. 1).

As theorized by Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006), a personal vision is the manifestation of the ideal self “an image of what kind of person one wishes to be, what the person hopes to accomplish in life and work” (p. 625). Three key elements come into play for the discovery of the ideal self, namely efficacy, hope, and openness (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). As Boyatzis et al. (2015) stated, “at the center of the concept of vision is that the desired images of the future, or a hoped for future, helps create or remind people about their sense of purpose. Deeper than goals or strategy, vision can provide a sense of mission” (p. 2).

The impact of COVID-19 for women in the workplace has left unprecedented damage to the female workforce and has hindered and affected a vast number of women across the globe. In the Global Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum (2021) shared that “early projections from ILO suggest 5% of all employed women lost their jobs, compared with 3.9% of employed men. LinkedIn data further shows a marked decline of women’s hiring into leadership roles, creating a reversal of 1 to 2 years of progress across multiple industries” (p. 6).

With individuals having to work from home and juggle dual shifts and uncharted professional territories, “more than one in four women [in the US] are contemplating what many would have considered unthinkable:...downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce completely” (McKinsey & LeanIn.org, 2020, p. 6). As Alisha Gupta explored in the New York Times (2020) article “Why some women call this recession a ‘shecession’”, in having to downsize their careers and ambitions, women were disproportionately affected more than men. Reports of stress, burnout, exhaustion, and mental health issues are putting many female professionals at risk. In addition, re-entry into the workforce has been at a slower pace, whereby

some women who worked through the pandemic have had to withdraw from leadership opportunities and promotions (The Global Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum, 2021).

Many possible avenues could be investigated for this research. The researcher sought to understand the following: Within the context of today's complex world with expanded opportunities (despite many stalled by COVID-19) and statistics demonstrating that women are more discontent than they were 40 years ago, how some professional women achieve their personal vision, that is, the fulfilment of their dreams and aspirations.

### **Problem Statement**

It is the first time in history where women enjoy more choices in lifestyle, education, and work opportunities. According to Stevenson and Wolfers (2009):

The progress of women over recent decades has been extraordinary: the gender wage gap has partly closed; educational attainment has risen and is now surpassing that of men; women have gained an unprecedented level of control over fertility; technological change in the form of new domestic appliances has freed women from domestic drudgery; and women's freedoms within both the family and market sphere have expanded. (p. 3)

Since the 1990s, women have made serious progress in the workplace, achieving higher positions, closing the gender wage gap, and moving into male-dominated fields. In addition, the number of college-educated women has also grown exponentially over the last decade, and women made up most of the college-educated labor force in 2019, marking an historic turning point in gender parity (McKinsey Report, 2019).

Yet, Stevenson and Wolfers (2009) noted that "while the expansion in women's opportunities has been extensively studied, the concurrent decline in subjective well-being has largely gone unnoted" (p. 3). In an online Huffington article (17 November 2009) entitled "The Sad Shocking Truth about How Women Are Feeling," author Ariana Huffington expressed that

according to study after study, women are becoming more and more unhappy. This drop-in happiness is found in women across the social and economic landscape. It doesn't

matter what their marital status is, how much money they make, whether or not they have children, their ethnic background, or the country they live in. Women around the world are in a funk.

In fact, Maureen Dowd (2009) underscored in a *New York Times* piece that women have been increasingly unfulfilled, “according to the General Social Survey, which tracks Americans’ mood since 1972 and according to five other major studies around the world, women are getting gloomier and men are getting happier.” Research has identified that women are twice as likely to suffer from stress and anxiety than men (Remes et al., 2016).

For example, Biese and McKie (2016) researched Finnish professional women who voluntarily left established careers to ‘opt in’ to a lifestyle of choice. The researchers revealed that these women “found ways of working with things they loved and felt passionate about, without having to give up on other areas of life. This not only brought great relief, the ability to finally be able to embrace different parts of themselves, and to combine different areas of life, gave them a feeling of authenticity, which added to their psychological well-being” (p. 514). Bericat (2016) also noted that the well-being of women was highest among the self-employed or employers rather than women employed by an organization, possibly due to a greater motivation or wish to be self-employed.

Indeed, Carr (1997) conducted a study on 3,052 female respondents to understand whether and to what degree they had reached their career aspirations identified at 35 years of age. They found that the women who fell short on their objectives suffered from “lower levels of psychological well-being and purpose in life” (p. 3). Similarly, women who at age 35 lacked a personal vision also exhibited lower levels of well-being and purposefulness at age 53.

A study by Parker and Chusmir (1992) found non-managerial women placed a higher value on personal fulfilment and well-being and relationships than did the men, who identified

status and wealth as being of higher value. Similarly, female leaders also placed a higher value on fulfillment and security than did their male colleagues.

Ryan and Deci (2001) observe that “well-being is a complex construct that concerns optimal experience and functioning” (p. 141). Studies have in general focused on two dimensions, hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being. Hedonic well-being emphasizes subjective well-being, linked to happiness, while eudaimonia (human flourishing) encompasses personal fulfillment (Ryan and Deci, 2001).

These observations and additional research have demonstrated that “fulfillment of individual potential for achievement is vitally important” (Mednick & Thomas, 2008, p. 718). Yet, trends in self-reported subjective well-being have indicated that female happiness in the United States has declined since the 1970s (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009). It is noted that “a quiet economic and social revolution is taking place. It is a revolution of, by, and for women, driven by a quest for more—more time, more value, more peaceful and secure lives” (The Boston Consulting Group, October 2009).

In other words, the authors are suggesting that many women are searching for more fulfillment at home and work. Some women in this revolution have made the successful and determined effort to seek fulfillment by voluntarily leaving an organization to pursue their personal vision and transition to their new desired reality. Buse and Bilimoria (2014), for example, found that women in engineering who were able to identify a personal vision were more dedicated to their job and engaged in their career. These women took bold steps to turn their dreams into a personal vision and create for themselves a new reality. Thus, they have become the exemplars for other women with similar ambitions.

However, we do not know much about how these successful women summoned the courage to act upon their personal vision. Very little research has explained the process women undergo to achieve their personal aspirations. Although studies and articles have focused on dissatisfaction, a limited number have mentioned the creation of a personal vision. Therefore, research is warranted to understand the process these successful women have undergone to arrive at their desired reality. Further, the researcher sought in particular to understand whether achieving a personal vision led to greater fulfillment.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore with a group of 24 women who had a personal vision how they came to pursue their personal vision and transition to what was for them a new desired reality. A group of six women who had a personal vision but had not yet transitioned to their desired reality were also invited to participate in a virtual focus group discussion to share their individual journeys. The researcher sought to shed light on the phenomenon where women transition out of an established situation to pursue a personal vision. To carry out this research, the researcher addressed the following questions:

1. How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?
2. What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?
3. How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they face?
4. What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?

## **Approach**

This study identified a group of 24 accomplished college-educated women from diverse backgrounds and contexts. A verbal definition of personal vision was shared with each of them upon initial contact to ensure they understood the definition as pertained to this study. To capture the women's lived experiences, the researcher conducted a qualitative approach where in-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection. A constructivist perspective was explored to provide participants with the opportunity to share their experiences through the conduit of open-ended interview questions. This allowed the researcher to look for an intricacy of meanings and views (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

To supplement the research, the researcher conducted a virtual focus group with six women with personal visions who have not yet transitioned to their desired reality. A document review of participants' CVs and social media accounts was also carried out. It was hoped that shedding light on women's experiences through their personal narratives would provide unique insights into the strength of their personal visions and whether, in attaining their visions, they were consequently fulfilled.

## **Anticipated Outcomes**

The researcher anticipated that this study would reveal how women came to pursue their personal visions and transition to their desired reality. Using a transformational learning lens, the researcher hoped to identify a framework that demonstrates the intersection between life transition and the pursuit of a personal vision. It was hoped that the findings would help identify recommendations, tactics and strategies for professional coaches, educators, HR practitioners, and organizations to use as tools to support and promote women's professional growth and personal well-being.

## **Assumptions**

Upon embarking on this study, the researcher had a number of assumptions:

1. Equipped with a fuller sense of self, women may be better prepared to pursue a personal vision.
2. Women who follow through on their personal vision lead a more fulfilled life.
3. Women are hindered by their gender in realizing their dreams.
4. Women pursuing their personal vision are “subjectivists in their thinking.”
5. External and internal factors impact personal vision, which, in turn, impact personal and professional fulfillment.

## **Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study was based on the dearth of research about the experiences of women who hold personal visions and are able to transition to a desired reality. For example, research has demonstrated that “homemakers who do not have other outlets for achievement and productivity are highly susceptible to psychological distress” (Denmark & Paludi, 2007, p. 719). It was found that “women, like men, need to utilize their talents and abilities [as] multiple roles are important for people’s psychological well-being” (p. 718). Research has also indicated that a variety of roles, such as being a part of a family in addition to having employment, are valuable to women’s mental and physical health (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Stewart and Vandewater (1999) observed that college-educated women who recognized their ‘regrets’ based on certain life choices and made subsequent adjustments experienced far greater psychological well-being than the women who did not leverage their feelings.

This research is significant as it may benefit women looking to make a transition as well as professional coaches, educators, HR practitioners, and organizations seeking to support

women's professional and personal growth. Understanding the approach of women who successfully transition to a desired reality may be of service to women seeking to follow similar paths. Identifying the difference in women's ability to craft a personal vision may also be useful in training coaches, HR practitioners and women's organizations on methodologies for women seeking to activate and live their personal vision. It is also an opportunity to share stories of role models who have successfully pursued a personal vision as a backdrop to educate, inspire, and motivate other women with similar ambitions.

It is hoped that this research will play a significant role in our understanding of women's approach to decision-making as related to personal and professional choices, which are often uniquely intertwined over the course of their lives. Despite noteworthy positive trends and opportunities afforded, certainly to educated women, many still struggle to find fulfilling personal and professional paths that align with their personal vision.

### **The Researcher**

Throughout her career as an HR Practitioner and Coach, the researcher has immersed herself in talent development work in the international development field and human rights sector. She has had the privilege of working alongside individuals from around the globe and has been particularly active in the coaching, learning, and development arena, providing guidance and support for people, particularly women, in career transition.

The researcher has arduously pursued her personal vision and transitioned professionally and personally to her desired reality. She holds a Masters in HRM and is a certified Doctoral Candidate in Adult Learning and Leadership. She had a transformative experience during her AEGIS program which led her to launch a coaching and training practice for women on a quest to fulfilling their life dreams.



## Definitions

Personal vision, life dream, and ideal self are used interchangeably in this study as a description to express the pursuit of personal aspiration(s).

**Personal vision** - Boyatzis et al. (2019) define personal vision as “an expression of an individuals’ ideal self and future self. It encompasses dreams, values, passions, purpose, sense of calling, and core identity. It represents not just what a person desires to do but also who she wishes to be” (p. 103).

**Life dream** - Levinson (1978) identified the formation of a dream to be an important part of the progression into adulthood, where “in its primordial form, the dream is a vague sense of self-in-the-adult world, it has the quality of a vision, an imagined possibility that generates excitement and vitality” (p. 91).

**Ideal self** - “The articulation of the ideal self can be a strong personal vision” (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p. 5). Boyatzis and Akrivou expressed the ideal self as the “emotional driver of intentional change” and the core instrument for self-regulation and deep-rooted motivation. It appears as a personal vision, an articulation of what individuals seek and hope to achieve in their personal and professional lives.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction and Rationale of Topics

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore with a group of women how they applied personal vision to transition to what was for them a new desired reality. To frame this study, the researcher reviewed a number of materials to highlight the current body of information on the subject. She sought to capture different theoretical lenses from a variety of academic sources to underscore the gap of what is known and not known and to provide a baseline for the development of a conceptual framework aligned with the research questions.

The research literature, explored in relation to this study, encompassed two main areas: women in career transition and adult learning theory. This intersection provided a framework for understanding the phenomenon of career and life transition from an adult learning perspective. The topic of women in life and career transition provided a backdrop to issues facing women in relation to career and life transition choices. Reference was made to recent research on the subject and the ways in which women navigate their life within the context of their personal vision. To this end, the following topics under *Women in Career/Life Transitions* were explored: women's ways of knowing, challenges women face, career and life transition theories, career success, personal vision, self-efficacy, and barriers and bridges to transition.

The literature of the second topic covering adult learning theory placed emphasis on how women learn. This particular section made reference to the manner in which learning takes place and outlined the different ways in which women were observed to be in transition. It covered primarily informal and non-formal learning under the following subheadings: how women learn, transformative learning, self-directed learning, reflection, mentoring, networking, coaching, learning through relationships and dialogue, and learning from experience.

In researching relevant topics, the researcher examined articles and materials from a range of sources. A number of reports and materials were found through online databases, CLIO, ERIC, Catalyst, and Google Scholar. Academic journals and periodicals, books, and corporate documents provided additional information. Keywords selected to identify relevant material included a combination of words: *women and personal vision, women's career progression, women and critical reflection, women in career transition, self-efficacy, adult learning, women and transformative learning, women's aspirations, women's dreams, transformative learning, motivation, and the ideal self.*

The Conceptual Framework, informed by the research problem and questions posed, was developed based on the research identified from the review of the literature.

### **Topic I: Women in Career/Life Transitions**

#### **Women's Ways of Knowing**

Within the context of women's roles in the professional realm, an understanding of women's perspective of their own development helped frame the issue relative to the development of self-identity. While a large number of developmental theories, such as Kohlberg's (1984) moral development, are western-based and male-focused, a number of theorists have offered alternative perspectives.

Josselson (1987) outlined that women's development appears to be linked to their sense of self in relation to others, rather than as individuals operating independently. This theme was further underscored by the notion that women's identity is linked to connectedness and relationship to others, where the self and other are interdependent (Gilligan, 1993).

In particular, research undertaken by Belenky et al. (1986) focused specifically on the psychological development of women and how they gain knowledge through meaning-making of truth, knowledge, and authority. In identifying five epistemological perspectives—silence,

received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing—the researchers drew attention to the significance each perspective plays in the development of women’s self, voice, and mind.

Helms’s (1990) womanist identity development model identified similar parallels and drew from existing literature on gender identity. The model suggested that developing identity as a woman is linked to “allow[ing] external standards, from either gender to govern... identity development” (Ossana et al., 1992, p. 403). The term *womanist* was taken from Black feminist authors to highlight the process that women undergo as being similar across race and other ethnicities (Ossana et al., 1992).

Womanist identity development is comprised of four incremental phases that move toward “abandonment of external definitions and adaptation of internal standards of womanhood” (Ossana et al., 1992, p. 403). In the first phase, Pre-encounter, women typically adhere to societal values that undervalue women, often falling prey to discrimination. New experiences may lead to women moving from Pre-encounter to phase two, Encounter. Women in this phase more closely identify with womanhood and study ways of understanding the masculine-feminine dynamic. In stage three, Immersion-Emersion, women initially rebuff male-controlled definitions and later seek association with other women. In stage four, Internalization, women incorporate their own view of womanhood into their identity.

The model has been said to be applicable to women across racial and ethnic groups. Thus, it may provide invaluable information for addressing women’s many individual and group identities such as race and social context, thereby providing a broader spectrum of the types of experiences women undergo in their lifetime. This research plays a key role in understanding women’s approach to decision-making and knowledge construction as related to personal

choices and aspirations, which are often uniquely intertwined over the course of their professional careers.

### **Challenges Women Face**

The number of challenges women face over the course of their life in the socioeconomic realm has been articulated in a wealth of literature and studies. Lack of access to certain resources has made the “path to eudaimonia” uniquely challenging for women (Wu & Connerley, 2016, p 808). Research, for example, has found that women in high-powered positions opt-out of their career track; that the talent pipeline of highly educated, high-profile women remains low; and that women who have left their roles or given them serious consideration have repeatedly mentioned that these roles were simply not worth continuing (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010).

Women who voluntarily choose to leave a position within an organization have prompted endless debates. Belkin’s (2003) *New York Times* article that created the term *opt-out revolution* prompted a blaze of responses on the newspaper’s webpage and a national debate about the work motivations of women. The explanations linked primarily to women leaving because of work-family balance issues proved to be of immense disservice to women because they failed to address the complexities that women face and were not indicative of the plethora of reasons why women opt to transition to another lifestyle.

The following studies describe what is known in relation to women opting to leave their positions within organizations voluntarily. A study by Ely et al. (2014) on Harvard Business School MBA graduates found that women were less satisfied with their careers than men across four dimensions: meaningful work, professional accomplishments, opportunities for career growth, and compatibility of work and personal life. This survey and other research found that

the “vast majority leave reluctantly and as a last resort because they find themselves in unfulfilling roles with dim prospects for advancement” (p.7).

Similarly, Miles (2013) identified that women at the 10-year point were five times more likely to leave the workforce than their male counterparts. The research found that women appeared to be motivated differently than men; i.e., they were more intrinsically than extrinsically focused. The survey also captured that women left their jobs to strike balance and flexibility.

In contrast, in a U.S. study undertaken by McKinsey & LeanIn.org (2018) related to women in the workforce who intended to leave, 81% mentioned they planned to stay in the workforce. In this instance, few women were in fact looking to focus on family. The report identified a number of issues that women faced in the workplace, e.g., receiving less support from managers, having limited access to senior leaders, experiencing sexual and workplace harassment, and more often than not being the ‘only’ woman in the room.

Being “the only one” remains a common experience for women. One in five women confirmed that they were often the only ones in the room, and in view of the negative feelings associated with this issue, women were 1.5 times more likely to contemplate leaving their jobs (McKinsey & LeanIn.org, 2018). In particular, Black women in the United States were found to be twice as likely to experience being “the only” and finding themselves in an unsupportive environment (McKinsey, 2020). In addition, research data indicated that women were identified as having fewer than 20% of board seats at Fortune 500 companies, with a minimal increase in presence over the last 5 years (Ely et al., 2014).

Further research has corroborated that women are three times more likely than men to think gender played a role in their missing out on a raise, promotion, or other opportunities to

forge ahead in their career. Women also see it also as more probable that their gender will create more challenges for them over the course of time (International Labor Organization, ILO report, 2018).

Helgesen and Johnson (2010) found that women placed greater value on the quality of their work experience on a daily basis, as opposed to men who placed significant value on the promotional aspect and future prospects of their job. High-achieving women were noted as voluntarily leaving their employment and starting to revisit their definition of success (Macko & Rubin, 2004).

The research has also outlined a number of challenges women face in their professional journeys and the reasons for women's departure from the workforce or decision to transition to a new desired life. With the onset of COVID-19, the issues women usually face have been exacerbated, and challenges have continued within a new reality.

### **Life and Career Transition Theories**

There continues to be an abundance of literature on careers and career transitions, with a high volume focused on the nuances between men's and women's career trajectories. O'Neill and Bilimoria (2005) noted that family responsibilities, women's roles in connection, and lack of representation in the higher ranks of companies all play a role in the discrepancies between the career paths of men and women.

A number of transition theories can be reviewed within the context of women's career decisions. Transitions are typically a process over time. During a process transition, individuals need to reconcile the contradiction of holding on to what is known and unknown in order to best organize themselves and cope with uncertainty (Bussolari & Goddel, 2009; Brammer, 1991).

Career theories such as multidirectional careers (Baruch, 2004) or boundaryless careers (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) that emerged since the 1990s better reflect the needs of a more

diverse workforce and the realm in which women operate on a professional level. These theories recognize that many women are crafting customized careers in response to their personal values and particular life situations (Valcour et al., 2007).

### ***Schlossberg's Transition Model***

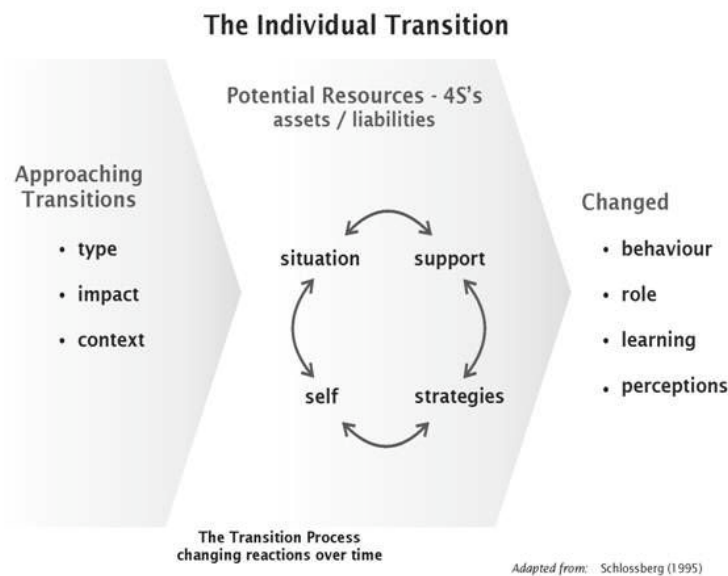
Anderson et al. (2011) defined transition as “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 39). It involves individuals experiencing a journey, departing from their personal situation, and engaging in a different one (Fernandez et al., 2008). Transitions typically present under three distinct forms: planned, unanticipated, or non-occurring (Anderson et al., 2011).

The transition framework developed by Nancy K. Schlossberg (1981) provided an overview of the process individuals undergo during a point of change or transition. The model, focused on the type, context, and impact of transition, distinguishes itself with three individual parts: approaching transitions and transition identification; taking stock of coping resources (known as the 4S's); and taking charge, thereby strengthening resources. The 4S's depict the segments of self, support, situation, and strategies that influence the individual's ability to cope with change amid a transition (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1**

***Schlossberg's Transition Model***



Schlossberg (1984) brought attention to the notion that life-work transitions are greater than simply behaviors, consequences, and experiences, and are also a personal transformation journey.

***The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM)***

The KCM model is a framework that assesses women's careers and women's decision-making approaches in conjunction with women's life and career paths and subsequent choices and decisions (Mainero & Sullivan, 2005). It provides an overview of three elements—authenticity, balance, and challenge—that influence women's choices related to work and life and serve as a backdrop from which to identify options and choices in relation to their professional and personal cycles.

While all three elements are always present, each takes on a different level of importance and intensity, based on the stage at which the women operate over the course of their life and career. From the perspective of women's professional transition, it helps underline the different

ways in which such transitions may be viewed through a developmental lens and the impact of changeability and uncertainty on how each factor manifests itself within the context of a transition.

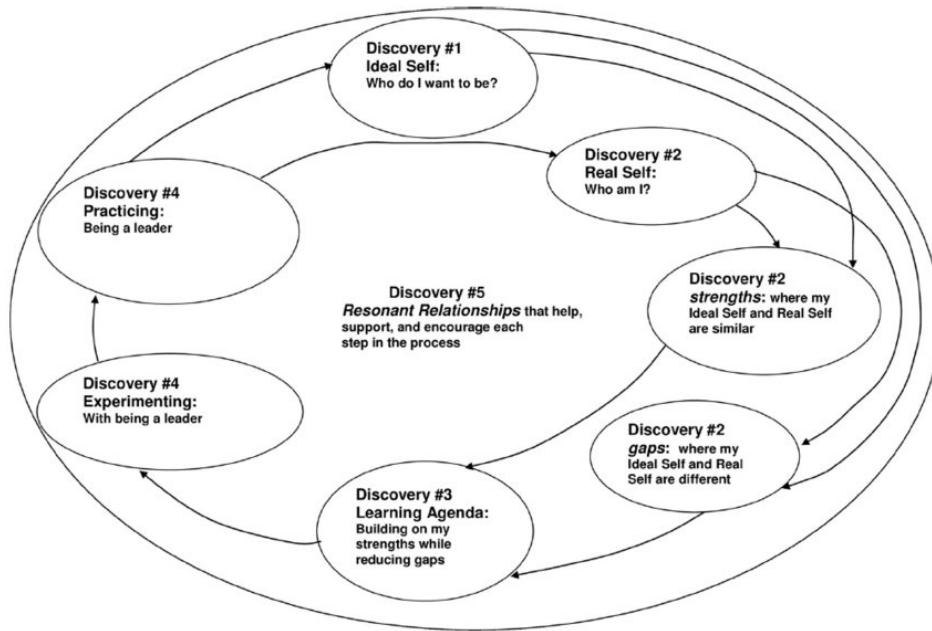
***Intentional Change Theory (ITC)***

Boyatzis’s (2008) ITC model posited that engaging a person’s ideal self or personal vision is the process and fundamental driver of long-lasting change. While it is not a career-specific model, it is based on the notion that behavioral change does not occur in a linear fashion; rather, “it involves a sequence of discontinuities called discoveries which function as an iterative cycle in producing the sustainable change at the individual level” (Boyatzis, 2006, p. 613). It provides an overview of how people embark on a transition for sustainable change over time.

(See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2**

***Intentional Change Theory***



Boyatzis theory of self-directed learning

(Boyatzis, 1999, 2001; Goleman et al., 2002)

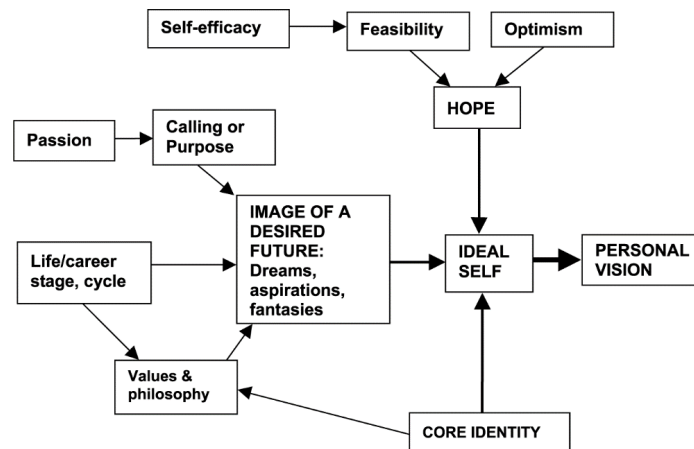
The discoveries that underpin the model are summarized below (Boyatzis, 2006; Goleman et al., 2002):

1. First discovery: My ideal self—who do I want to be?
2. Second discovery: My real self—who am I? What are my strengths and gaps?
3. Third discovery: My learning agenda—how can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?
4. Fourth discovery: Experimentation and practice—experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery.
5. Fifth discovery: Developing supportive and trusting relationships that make change possible (see Figure 2).

The first discovery is the *ideal self* or personal vision, the manifestation of the person's desired reality. Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) posit that the ideal self “manifests as a personal vision or an image of what kind of person one wishes to be, what the person hopes to accomplish in life and work” (p. 625). The ideal self is comprised of three elements: an image of a desired future, emotionally fueled by hope and reflective of a person's core identity. Discovering an ideal self requires efficacy, hope, and openness (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006; Buse & Bilimora, 2014). Boyatzis et al. (2015) underlined that the alignment of the ideal self with an individual's “identity, values, goals, and aspirations” awakens hope and efficacy, without which positive emotion would not occur. (See Figure 3 for components of the ideal self.)

**Figure 3**

*Components of the Ideal Self*



Source: Boyatzis & Akrivou (2006)

The ideal self, a source of positive effect, drives personal vision which, in turn, drives sustainable intentional change. According to Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) “the conscious realization of one’s ideal self may appear as a surprise or an epiphany...it is a phase change. It is a small adjustment to a person’s awareness of their desires that has a huge impact on their perceptions and choices” (p. 628). Personal vision is deemed fundamental for continued and “sustained change,” and Boyatzis et al. (2015, 2018, 2019) have written extensively on the topic of the benefits of engaging an individual’s personal vision or ideal self as the fundamental driver of continued and chosen change.

Studies on the neuroscience of coaching conducted by Boyatzis and Jack (2018) found that coaching to compassion or to the Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA) “encourage[d] the individual to be motivated, willing to tackle difficulties, and open to new ideas and the coach” (p. 13). On the other hand, coaching to compliance or to the Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA) brings about pressure and concerns. Howard (2015) and Passarelli (2015) found that

PEA-led coaching conversations resulted in “more positive feelings about change, more committed goals, and more psychological energy expressed toward a future vision” (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018, p. 20). Anchoring personal vision for transition purposes was found to be a positive instigator of personal change.

### *A Western Lens*

Most of the research on the career development of women has evolved from a Western lens, leading to an absence of information on challenges that may be faced in different cultures, particularly as related to women’s career and life experiences. It is therefore increasingly difficult to apply a Western approach in situations that are dependent on numerous factors taken for granted in a Western setting (Pryor & Bright, 2014). Specifically, there is limited research on women’s experiences in non-Western non-traditional cultures and how these women make the choice to transition to a desired new reality.

### *Patterns Identified across Studies*

In the challenges women face, the patterns that are repeated relate to women’s pursuit of a career that affords more flexibility and provides a respectful environment where support and recognition are integral parts of their professional setting. Intrinsic motivators appear to be of much higher value than extrinsic motivators. An additional study by DeMartino and Barbato (2003) found that when asked about the career motivators that were the most important, women entrepreneurs preferred a career that gave them flexibility and allowed them to balance their career with their family obligations. It also appears throughout the studies that women who reached the point of choosing to transition to a desired aspiration fell in the category of constructed knowledge where the integration of self, voice, and mind took place.

The gender differences are repeated across studies; that is, issues with workplace

challenges and the traditional caregiver role attributed to women, make women's approach to work choices far more complex than for men. Women's decisions are influenced by a number of elements, both professional and private, that have consequences on their ability to navigate their professional opportunities. Slaughter (2005) in particular, observes that women aiming for leadership roles should look at their career paths as a series of steps and plateaus or as "investment intervals" rather than one linear career trajectory with limited opportunity to invest in family life.

Limited theories have addressed the current trends that are at play in the 21st century, with evolving family dynamics, values and personal fulfilment, global disorienting dilemmas, and the role of women in today's society. Thus, more research needs to be undertaken to explore how women manage to transition to their desired new reality by pursuing their personal vision.

### **Defining Personal Vision**

Literature on the topic of vision within organizations has been plentiful (Van Deison, 1994). Vision is a highly regarded measure of success in leadership, organizational management, and education. However, little has been explored regarding personal vision and aspirations. Vision became popular in the 1980s with authors such as Bennis and Nanus (1985) noting that "vision is the commodity of leaders, and power is their currency" (p. 18). Organizational vision and leaders' approach to vision became topics that were explored in depth.

Peter Senge, MIT professor and author of *The Fifth Discipline* (1994), was one of the few to reference the idea that "shared visions emerge from personal visions [which in turn] derive energy and how to foster commitment" (p. 211). He noted that organizations tended to focus solely on organizational vision, sidestepping personal vision to get to "strategic vision" (p. 213).

For the purposes of this research, personal vision is identified within the context of individual goals and aspirations, and not within the framework of a larger organization. A variety of definitions are outlined in this research as per the literature.

Dieson's (1994) findings related to personal vision identified 11 elements that define personal vision: "the desire for something better, a sense of purpose, core values, evaluation of life influences, examination of present strengths and resources, a developmental process, use of intuition and related skills, risk, continual reinforcing as life changes, the support of others, and everyone having it in some form" (p. 7).

Bandura (1997) observed that people's visions were linked to goals that range from proximal to extreme distal goals. Masuda et al. (2010) outlined that "proximal goals regulate immediate motivation and action which provide ongoing feedback and a sense of personal mastery [whereas] distal goals define enduring aspirations that attract individuals toward meaningful destinations" (p. 222). Higher-order goals based on Bandura's social cognitive theory are defined as personal vision (Masuda et al., 2010) "where the primary role of a personal vision is to instill purpose to move towards a meaningful destination" (p. 222). Masuda et al. explained that personal vision influences motivation indirectly via the setting of "proximal task goals." A compelling personal vision is thus "vivid and challenging and stimulates the setting of and commitment to difficult and specific proximal goals" (p. 222).

Bandura's theory outlined that personal drive, fueled by possible futures and proximal goals that aid in future goal attainment, is the cornerstone of human motivation (Cropanzano & Citera, 1993). Similarly, in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Deci and Ryan (1985) advanced that human motivation relies on the role of "inner resources," in which three needs—competence, relatedness, and autonomy—are found to be "essential for facilitating optimal

functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). When these psychological needs are not met, demotivation ensues. Intrinsic motivation, “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend, and exercise one’s capacities, to explore and to learn,” can only be upheld by supportive conditions (p. 70). In contrast, extrinsic motivation relates to the “performance of a task in order to attain some separable outcome” (p. 71). Ryan et al. (1999) similarly reported that attainment of intrinsic aspirations was linked to well-being, whereas obtaining extrinsic aspirations did not yield the same emotion.

### ***Shared Vision***

While the research is based on personal vision, shared vision also plays a role in supporting the transition to a desired new reality. Overbeke et al. (2015), who studied fathers and daughters in family businesses, noted that self-efficacy and gender norms influenced shared vision; fathers and daughters who shared a vision strongly increased the likelihood of daughter succession. The findings indicated that self-efficacy encouraged daughters to develop an ideal vision for the business; thus, a strong relationship between self-efficacy and vision was identified as an essential component for change.

Where self-efficacy was present, women were able to pursue their personal vision and transcend gender barriers. It was found that daughters needed to “self-select and be selected as successors to develop domain-specific self-efficacy that is recognizable to others and to leverage that efficacy to form visions” (Overbeke et al., 2015, p. 13). The study underpinned the notion that shared vision was achieved by the father’s understanding of the consequences of gender biases as well as the encouragement of the daughter’s personal vision.



Buse and Bilimoria (2014) posited that personal vision, “operationalized as the ideal self,” enhanced the work engagement and retention of women (p. 10). The women who articulated a personal vision were committed to and persisted in their chosen careers. They found that women who persevered had a personal vision “that included their profession, and that this personal vision enabled them to overcome the bias, barriers and discrimination in the... workplace” (p. 1). They also found that work engagement was the “mediating mechanism linking career commitment to self-efficacy” (p. 10). Lastly, they identified that a woman’s career commitment was “influenced not only by work engagement, but...impacted by her relationship with her manager and an interaction effect between her age and number of children” (p. 10).

In an organizational context, Ibarra and Obodaru (2009) outlined their research on 360-degree evaluations of 2,816 executives from 149 countries who were enrolled in an executive program at INSEAD (Institut Européen d’Administration des Affaires). They found that women remained a minority in leadership positions due to their perceived lack of vision. In particular, the data showed that female leaders were rated lower by their male observers, but not by their female co-workers, on their capabilities in “envisioning.” In the feedback, women scored low on critical elements of visioning, “including the ability to sense opportunities and threats, to set strategic direction and inspire constituents” (p. 1).

One can conclude that self-efficacy as well as a personal and shared vision played essential roles in supporting women’s ability to envision and act on their new desired reality, and that different contexts influenced the ability to identify and act according to their desired life and career choice.

The research has demonstrated that personal vision plays an essential role in accelerating women’s aspirations to their chosen path. The literature has also highlighted the effects on

women who lack a personal vision, but it does not expand on the limitations of not having a personal vision. The literature instead points to the positive effect and motivational nature of vision in supporting women's desires, hopes, and aspirations. The ICT model (Boyatzis, 2008) illustrates the role of vision in sustained change. However, Samuel and Samuel (2018) found that women's commitment to career is "not fully influenced by their personal vision," and that work challenges might limit women's perception of the role of optimism and self-efficacy as related to personal vision (p. 743).

### ***Elements Leading to Personal Vision***

Mainero and Sullivan (2005) found that a variety of needs—both work and non-work-related—lead women to pursue a preferred vision. These non-work needs ranged from discrimination issues to the quest for fulfillment, as well as seeking more balance and the need for self-care. Mainero and Sullivan identified that women tended to concentrate concurrently on the context of interactions and connections throughout their lives while considering the three elements of the Kaleidoscope model—authenticity, balance, and challenge—at each personal pivotal moment before making any life-altering decisions. A study by Sims and Morris (2018) also found that women who became business owners felt compelled to act with authenticity, following their personal vision of a life of fulfillment and meaning.

### ***Barriers to Personal Vision***

Gender biases and sexist environments were found to restrict opportunities for succession and were seen as barriers to personal vision (Overbeke et al., 2015). A discriminatory environment discouraged daughters from pursuing their vision. Gender biases were found to contribute to invisibility (Overbeke et al., 2013).

Overbeke et al. (2015) further identified that the negative relationship between fathers' beliefs about expressive behaviors and daughters' succession revealed "the influence of sex stereotypes on perceptions of appropriate career choices for daughters. Fathers who perceived that daughters were expressive—or nurturing, caring, and cooperative—ruled out daughters' possibilities for succession" (p. 12).

Ibarra and Obodaru (2009) found that women tended not to buy into the value of being visionary; they lacked the confidence to move forward with an untested vision, and those who developed a vision with their teams did not receive credit for their vision. Their findings implied that the "shortfall" in female leadership was, to some extent, due to the supposed lack of vision, and that was the only leadership dimension holding them back.

Masuda et al.'s (2010) research found that students who described "a challenging and vivid personal goal were more likely to set difficult and specific college goals," whereas "individuals who had a clear idea of where they wanted to be in 10 years and who were ambitious were more likely to challenge themselves by setting difficult and specific college goals" (p. 238). The findings underscored how crafting a compelling personal vision could be challenging for some individuals, but they also highlighted that having a personal vision alone was insufficient for transitioning to a new desired reality. As Fels (2004) highlighted:

Women too frequently seek to deflect attention from themselves. They refuse to claim a central, purposeful place in their own stories, eagerly shifting the credit elsewhere and shunning recognition. Furthermore, on close inspection, it emerges that it's not only women of achievement who anxiously work to relinquish recognition—it's nearly all women. Studies have demonstrated that the daily texture of women's lives from childhood on is infiltrated with micro encounters in which quiet withdrawal and the ceding of available attention to others is expected—particularly in the presence of men. (p. 4)

Women were thus unintentionally valuing the roles they were taught since childhood and putting up their own barriers to their detriment.

Similarly, women valued relationships and connectedness with others to an extent where they often sacrificed their own needs for others (Gilligan, 1993). This led them to carefully evaluate the impact of their career choices on the lives of those in their circle of relatedness. For women in the corporate world, many saw the choices they were faced with in climbing the corporate ladder as being a high price to pay. This offered one of many explanations for why women have been making gradual progress in advancing into higher-ranking positions (Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005).

### **Self-efficacy**

Women, as pointed out in the research, operate more relationally and are far more likely than men to view any decisions they make for themselves as creating change for others (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Bandura (1982) proposed the term *self-efficacy* to determine a person's ability to reach a task and to explain behaviors. He underscored that motivation was strongly linked to expectations of accomplishment or disappointment.

Bandura's (2001) research focused extensively on agency, which embodies the talents, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities, structures, and functions through which personal influence takes shape. Agency permits individuals to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal, where behavior is motivated by projected goals and expected results, and where individuals can guide and adjust their actions. Of particular note is that within agency lies efficacy, or an individual's belief in the capability to exercise control over one's environment. Cultural research also attests to the value of efficacy beliefs, where people from individualistic cultures feel most efficacious and perform best under an individually oriented system, as opposed to those from collectivistic cultures who work most productively under a group-oriented system.

Nevill and Schecker (1988) identified that women showing self-efficacy were more

willing to select non-traditional paths. However, regardless of level of self-efficacy or of assertiveness, women prefer to engage in the career-related activities of traditional occupations. The finding corroborated Hackett and Betz's (1981) research, where a traditional job was found to be of greater importance in the self-efficacy of women.

### **Barriers and Bridges to Transition**

The literature has underscored that women overcome career challenges under different circumstances. Hewlett (2008) in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Off-ramps and on Ramps Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success," observed that women worked part-time as a strategy to balancing work and personal life. She found that some women chose jobs with fewer responsibilities in order to fulfill responsibilities at home (p. 7). In her 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article, Anna Fels (author of *Do Women Lack Ambition?*) found that in order to hold on to their dreams, women needed to rely on "mastery and recognition" to attain the necessary skills and experience as well as have their "achievements appropriately recognized" (p. 8). Failure to observe the latter led to undermining female ambition, thus perpetuating the "downsizing" of women's aspirations.

Similar to Belenky et al. (1997), research conducted by Richie et al. (1997) found that successful women were "relationally oriented...persistent in the face of obstacles, and...passionate and hard workers"; they also tended to "tackle difficult problems directly, to seek social support, and to reframe obstacles into challenges" (p. 35). In addition, a high level of self-efficacy was a key trait of the women and contributed to their determination and persistence in the face of difficulties, as observed in the literature (Bandura, 1989; Betz & Hackett, 1986).

Terjesen (2005) found that the acquisition of human and social capital enhances women's progress to leadership positions. Human capital in this context relates to the skills, knowledge, and experiences of an individual, viewed in terms of their value to an organization. In

comparison, while also being linked to career advancement, capital theory looks at the value of an individual's position within a network of relationships and resources identified and leveraged from these very networks (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Findings identified that senior female managers leveraged “‘embedded career capital,’ human capital, and social capital accumulated from past experiences when founding and growing their own businesses” (p. 2).

Hewlett and Luce (2005) found that women temporarily transitioning out of the workforce found the “on ramp” extremely costly and frustrating. Hewlett's (2008) data demonstrated that women “lose an average of 18% of their earning power when taking an off-ramp,” where in business settings, that can reach 28%. Across all sectors, women lose 37% of their earning power when they leave the workforce for more than 3 years (p. 5). Unlike men, women take the “off ramp” for family time (44%) versus men whose top reason remains a change in career (29%). Thus, overall, women choosing to take some time out in order to transition had the challenge of losing earning power.

Second-generation bias was an additional barrier to transition. This refers to practices that may appear neutral but discriminate against a gender because they reflect the values of the gender creating the environment. Ibarra et al.'s (2013) *Harvard Business Review* article “Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers” underscored the findings of social psychologist Faye Crosby that a majority of women are “unaware of having personally been victims of gender discrimination and deny it” (p. 5). A lack of understanding of this bias is an additional barrier to women being able to achieve their fullest potential in the pursuit of their personal vision. “It creates a context—akin to ‘something in the water’— in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential” (Ibarra et al., 2013, p. 6).

## **Additional Factors That Help Women’s Transition**

The research has also pointed to a number of additional elements that have helped women transition to success. The 2019 State of Women-Owned Business Report outlined that ambition was a determining factor helping women transition to their desired future: “the high growth in the number of women-owned businesses with \$1 million or more in revenue—the second highest of the segments—is proving that women are ambitious and have the chops to succeed” (p. 10). They continued to say that “sidepreneurs,” or part-time entrepreneurs, “may be testing a business idea while holding down a job or supplementing income or seeking a creative outlet or an additional challenge. They may also want flexibility because they have caregiving responsibilities or want a certain lifestyle” (p. 2).

Hope and identity were also found to influence career commitment in a study of 117 working women in Malaysia (Samuel & Samuel, 2018). Buse and Bilimoria (2014) found that women with a vision could overcome biases in the workplace. Ibarra et al. (2013) observed that women who were able to “recognize the subtle and pervasive effects of second-generation bias,...feel empowered, not victimized, because they [could] take action to counter those effects” (p. 6).

Buse (2009) noted that women who stayed within the engineering profession persisted due to a high level of self-efficacy and described themselves in terms of identity motivated by challenges and novelty. Buse and Bilimoria (2014) found that despite challenges, the women who persevered through career challenges were immersed and attached to the work and found meaning in it for themselves as well as “novelty and continued learning” that kept them engaged with their job (p. 11). Unlike the KCM that points to women trading challenge for balance, their research found that meaning and engagement allowed women to find the right balance. In *See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1,000 Girls Became Successful Women* (Rimm, 2000) the

researcher noted that women often attributed their good fortune or accomplishments to luck and serendipity.

The literature also pointed to self-efficacy, tenacity, and hope as playing essential roles in supporting women's ability to pursue and stay in their chosen field. In all of the findings, persistence, connection, and purpose appeared as underlying themes that supported women's success. These three elements were found to be contributing factors in a study conducted by Richie et al. (1997) on the successful career development of high-achieving African American and White women.

### **Additional Factors That Hinder Women's Transition**

Multiple factors that hinder women's transition were found in the research. Fels's (2004) article observed that the discrepancy in ambition levels between genders has a detrimental effect resulting in a scarcity of role models for younger women. If women are unable to see themselves in careers of choice, they are less likely to visualize these careers for themselves.

In "Impossible Selves: Image Strategies and Identity Threat in Professional Women's Career Transitions," Ibarra and Petriglieri (2016) explored the difference in how men and women approach image and identity in a professional transition. Unlike men, women had more difficulty accessing suitable role models and, consequently, were less prone than men to use "imitation strategies in fashioning provisional selves" to fill the gap (p. 3). As a result, women also engaged in "protective" self-presentation—behavior geared toward avoiding disapproval—compared to the men who veered toward "acquisitive" self-presentation, which is defined as behavior aimed at eliciting approval.

Apprehension was also identified as an area of concern when individuals experience a personal or professional shift. With professional transition comes the likelihood of identity threat, expressed as "any thought, feeling, action or experience which challenges the individual's



personal and social identity” (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016, p. 11). Ibarra et al. noted that regardless of gender, individuals often display a level of self-doubt and concern.

Mainero and Sullivan (2005) also observed that caregiving hindered women from pursuing career opportunities. Women found career success by approaching their careers through a nonlinear lens, choosing to create “nontraditional, self-crafted careers that suited their objectives, needs and life criteria” (p. 109). This was different from their male counterparts who approached their careers in a more traditional and progressively linear manner.

Overall, the literature has underscored that women who faced challenges pursuing their vision were hindered by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors, such as lack of vision and self-esteem, minimal support, and feelings of being overwhelmed by the weight of household duties and socioeconomic factors.

## **Topic II: Adult Learning Theory**

The literature posits that learning is seen as a lifelong and uninterrupted process that adults experience by partaking in everyday moments in relation to others and their surroundings (Marsick & Volpe, 1999; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Formal learning can be characterized as learning delivered by academic institutions. Marsick and Watkins (1990) defined it as “typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured” (p. 12). It is viewed as occurring in education sites and typically expands from preschool to postgraduate studies. Sites such as “adult education programs” and “professional training programs,” which follow prescribed curricula as identified by the overarching educational structure, are also in this category (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). With formal learning, education is the primary effort. In contrast, non-formal learning is sponsored by “organizations,

agencies, and institutions,” and the events, typically held outside the educational system and in community environments are of short duration (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

Informal learning, by comparison is typically unstructured, non-sequential, not teacher-led, and involves minimal external support (Erat, 2004; Marsick & Volpe, 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). It is “experiential, and noninstitutional [and] takes place as people go about their daily activities at work or in other spheres of life” (Marsick & Volpe, 1999, p. 4). They further explained that incidental learning typically occurs regularly, although individuals are not “always conscious of it” (p. 12), thus rendering it “unintended” at times (Erat, 2004, p. 250).

Informal learning encompasses other forms of learning: self-directed, incidental, and tacit (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Marsick and Watkins (2001) included “networking, coaching and mentoring” as part of the informal aspects of learning (p. 25). Incidental learning occurs “as an accidental by-product” when an individual is undertaking something else (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 19). After having been involved in an experience, the person is conscious of “some learning [having] taken place” (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 4). It also involves learning from mistakes, learning by doing, and learning through “interpersonal experiments” (Marsick & Watkins, 2015, p. 13). Both informal and incidental learning are “enhanced by proactivity, critical reflection and creativity” (p. 8). Tacit learning manifests at the subconscious level with which individuals engage on a daily basis as they navigate their lives (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

Bennett (2012) included a fourth approach: integrative learning described as “learning process that combines intentional nonconscious processing of tacit knowledge with conscious access to learning products and mental images” (p. 28). In sum, both informal and incidental learning take place when individuals have the “need, motivation, and opportunity for learning”

(Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 28). Marsick and Watkins (2015) later underscored the importance of context in the informal learning process, which had previously been set aside but has now been shown to be an integral part of the ways in which individuals make meaning of their environment and their learning.

The women in this present study were able to follow their personal vision through their experience as informal learners. Through the adult learning perspective, the topic of how adults learn was explored through the informal lens.

### **How Women Learn**

Researchers have posited that learning preference is associated with gender. MacKeracher (2004) suggested that women prefer relational learning as opposed to autonomous learning, which is favored by men. English and Irving (2012) found that there was minimal new research on transformative learning that made gender a primary category of study “in an attempt to unite with other causes in the struggle for equality and to tone down feminist rhetoric, adult education scholars have forgone special attention to women; this depoliticization means that women’s needs and causes are increasingly hidden” (p. 246).

Looking at how women learn to make career-altering decisions through different theoretical approaches offers additional perspectives of the various elements at play and provides rich opportunities for continued insights into adult development angles. Transition theory such as Schlossberg’s model offers a backdrop defining how adults learn to engage in the change process. When applied to the problem, the model provides a context in which to situate women on the learning continuum as they experience transition.

Adult development theories emphasize the need for models that better reflect the realities of women and an approach that focuses on relatedness and connectedness as opposed to separateness (Gilligan, 1993; Peck, 1986). In that sense, these theories can be drawn on to

understand the role of relatedness in women's professional learning trajectories.

Research has underlined the role of connected knowing in women's informal learning. While the literature has shown that connected knowing is one aspect of how women use informal learning, separate knowing is also observed in women. Sugiyama et al. (2016) witnessed that by "engaging in both separate and connected knowing, women can integrate the need for distinctiveness and the need to belong" (p. 285). Through the integration of both separate and connected knowing, women benefit from a dynamic learning style and expanded connections. Separate knowing determines women's ability to think critically and make objective assessments that can be used to gain knowledge competitively (Belenky et al., 1997), all of which are essential in relation to transitions.

Belenky et al. (1997) highlighted that women gain knowledge by reflecting on their experiences, sharing, growing relationships, and engaging with others. Research has also substantiated that women more closely align with connected knowing (Aldegether, 2017; Khine & Hayes, 2010; Selzer et al., 2017). Khine and Hayes (2010) observed that separate knowing is a manner in which knowledge enables women to become more self-assured and better informed.

Marrs and Benton (2009) ran a study with 72 male and 169 female participants to explore separate and connected knowing within a community college context and noted that differences in knowing were linked to gender. The results corroborated Belenky et al.'s findings; women scored higher on connected knowing and lower on separate knowing than men. Khine and Hayes (2010) observed 167 Muslim women's ways of knowing in a study of their teacher training in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which also confirmed earlier studies illustrating that women prefer a connected way of knowing.

Additional literature revealed that gender plays an instrumental role in learning approaches. Magolda (1992), however, posited ways of knowing as being “related to, but not dictated by gender” (p. 22). Galloti et al. (1999) noted that a person’s epistemological approach affects their approach to the learning process, as opposed to the amount of learning that takes place.

### **Transformative Learning (TL)**

Transformative learning (TL) is a theory of adult learning that describes “how adults learn to make meaning of their experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 198). Mezirow (1990) defined learning as “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (p. 1). Cranton (2016) added that transformative learning can be seen as self-directed and voluntary.

Based on his research of women returning to the workplace, Mezirow’s (1991) theory outlined how adults make meaning from and interpret their experiences. He identified that the women in the study had undergone significant personal transformation and been subject to similar experiences—namely, a disorienting dilemma, critical self-reflection, and a subsequent change to their way of knowing. Mezirow defined perspective transformation as

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Transformative learning enhances inquiry, reflection, and critical consciousness. It involves “reflectively transforming the beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that constitute our meaning schemes or transforming our meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 223). The process of transformative learning is anchored in life experience “it shapes people;

they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize” (Clark, 1993, p. 47).

In essence, Mezirow (1997) explained that over time, adults build “a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings conditioned responses—frames of references that define their life world” (p. 5). He expanded that transformation was the process of effecting change in one of the frames of reference (or meaning perspectives), where “learners move towards a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective and integrative of experience” (p. 5). To change meaning perspective, Mezirow (2000) suggested individuals examine them in a critical manner where transformation may occur with the manifestation of a disorienting dilemma. He proposed that individuals experience, though non-sequentially, several phases of transformation resulting from a disorienting dilemma:

- A disorienting dilemma;
- A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame;
- A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions;
- Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change;
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
- Planning a course of action;
- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan;
- Provisional trying of new roles;
- Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
- A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective. (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. 19)

Mezirow further emphasized the importance of critical reflection and critical self-reflection in transformative learning, which he described as “critical assessment of assumptions [which] leads toward a clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgement” (p. 11).

Dirkx (2012) identified transformative learning as an approach that “aims for psychological wholeness through integration of conscious and unconscious and inner and outer aspects of our psyche” (p. 403). These two elements occur continuously and result, on occasion, in a transformed consciousness and sense of self (Dirkx, 2012).

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning provides insights into how women learn. Transformative learning theory has been applied as a theoretical framework for a vast number of studies involving women’s learning experiences and is thus an appropriate model to review within the context of how women came to learn to transition to their desired personal vision.

### **Self-Directed Learning (SDL)**

Self-directed learning (SDL) can be described as a process that is planned, executed, and assessed by the learner (Brookfield, 1986). Knowles (1980) promoted the term *andragogy*—“the art and science of helping adults learn.” SDL presents as a process as opposed to a learner characteristic and is illustrated in two models (Garrison, 1997; Pilling-Cormick, 1996) that highlight a holistic view of the learning experience. In Pilling-Cormick’s (1996) Self-Directed Learning Process (SDLP) model, SDL is shown as a process in which the individual is at liberty to choose his or her priorities and resources, which “play an active role in developing a system of meanings for interpreting events, ideas, or circumstances” (Pilling-Cormick & Garrison, 2007, p. 16).

In a study by Rager (2003) on “The Self-directed Learning of Women with Breast Cancer,” key aspects of Garrison’s (1997) model were highlighted in the process. The women in

Rager's study indicated that SDL was beneficial to them in this context, and the benefits went beyond their initial intentions. There were three motivations for their learning: reduce fear, validate treatment decisions, and getting clarity on the process of the treatment.

Unanticipated outcomes were a growth in self-confidence and a desire to help other patients. The study highlighted the four common learning methods of "networking, attending at support groups, reading, and using the Internet," which were self-management aspects of the self-directed experiences of the participants. Rager also found that SDL contributed to meeting the "emotional and psychological needs" of the participants. It was noted that these women exhibited SDL by accessing resources in environments where it was possible to do so.

In research conducted by Andruske (2003), women were observed to take part in SDL and shift their circumstances and adopt new behaviors through the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Smith's (1999) research on *Market Women: Learning Strategies of Successful Black Women Entrepreneurs* also found SDL to be of key importance in the successful learning strategies of female entrepreneurs.

## **Reflection**

Self-reflection typically relates to a state of contemplation, a thought that is possible without assessment (Mezirow, 1990). Critical reflection is the cornerstone of learning and is essential in helping adults address the intricacies, challenges, and obligations of adult life (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). It is seen as crucial in helping adults make decisions (Brookfield, 1987); increase personal wellness (Yorks & Marsick, 2000); deepen individual learning and provide a platform for exploration and growth (Boyatzis, 2006; Brookfield, 1987; Giroux & Giroux, 2004). Within the context of a personal or professional transition, reflection can be a springboard for introspection, and knowledge acquisition (Taylor, 2008).



According to Brookfield (2000), the purpose of critical reflection is to reveal “submerged power dynamics and relationships and identifying assumptions that are seen as being in our own best interest without realizing that these assumptions actually work against us in the long term” (pp. 137-138).

The work of Belenky et al. (1986) highlighted that a women’s epistemology has an influence on how women engage in reflection and rational discourse while also influencing how women act on their assumptions and new learning experiences. Their work brought to the forefront the manners by which women become connected knowers. Shifting away from Mezirow’s linear version of transformative learning, Belenky et al. observed how women’s social and economic standing has meant “a level playing field” which, as outlined by Mezirow, is not usually available to women. Belenky et al. observed that critical thinking skills, particularly for oppressed groups whose voices have not surfaced, are essential for women’s individual transformation to take place.

In a study Debebe (2009) conducted on women taking part in a leadership program and the impact of transformational learning, the findings confirmed the impact of critical reflection. Debebe interviewed 24 female scientists and discovered that through reflective practices, the women “act[ed] on the conviction to change, and...sustained their changed behavior permanently...[furthermore] through continued reflection and adjustment of practice, [they] increased [their] self-confidence and maturation in practice” (p. 9). This example highlighted the power of reflection within the context of personal vision.

While Castañeda (2019) noted the dearth of research focusing uniquely on women’s reflection and learning within the context of their career and transition process in higher education, she did observe that a number of articles have indicated “the potential for women’s

professional growth through introspective thinking, individually and in concert with others” (p. 42). Dingman (2004), in an extensive peer review on career coaching and reflection, noted the deliberate use of reflection to trigger learning and professional goal achievement in individuals.

In summary, women with the opportunity to self-reflect experience meaning-making shifts that provide opportunities for growth and breakthroughs.

### **Mentoring**

Women’s informal learning also occurs through opportunities such as mentoring (Sanfey et al., 2013) and networking (Bevelander & Page, 2011; Durbin, 2011). Research has demonstrated that successful mentoring helps reduce “feelings of isolation and contributes to increased self-confidence and work engagement” (Vasquez & Pandya, 2020). It provides a roadmap for the personal success of women (Weavind & McGrane, 2018). Mentoring appears to play an essential role in the career strategy of successful women and men. These findings are consistent with those reported in the literature on samples that include both men and women (Dreher & Cox, 1996; Scandura, 1997).

Mentoring has always been an essential element of women’s transformational learning and has been shown to help women expand their professional and personal aspirations (Sandberg, 2013). A study by Laukhuf and Malone (2015) found that female entrepreneurs profit from a sense of “recognition” and “achievement,” which supported the advancement of their business as well as grew their “transformational leadership” skills (p. 17). More importantly, the mentoring relationship “helped them face their challenges and proactively confront barriers” (p. 82). In addition, reported successes included the importance of trust established between mentor and mentee and the ability to request help when needed.

Wallace's (2001) research on mentoring female lawyers highlighted that having a mentor contributed significantly to the success of female employees as related to earnings, social integration, and leadership opportunities. She also found that women mentored by women reported higher career satisfaction whereby "female mentors are better able than male mentors to identify with their female proteges and prepare them for...unique stresses" (p. 385). Wallace went on to describe that female mentees feel more "socially integrated" than non-mentored women. One career aspect that stood out was that female mentees reported significantly higher incomes if their mentors were male, which pointed to the benefit of having mixed mentors to derive the opportunity to cover emotional and practical needs.

In an extensive study on mentoring women in career advancement conducted by Tharenou (2005), the mentoring relationship was viewed through two lenses: career and psychosocial (emotional) aspects. While mentor support consistently showed that it increased women's career prospects, findings underscored that while mentor support enhanced women's learning and approach to their personal aspirations, the psychosocial aspect in fact "reduced women's advancement more than it did the men's" (p. 101).

Tharenou (2005) posited that women supported by female mentors are primed for better career advancement perhaps because mentees "gain from being sponsored, challenged and coached by someone like themselves" (p. 101). However, female mentors who offer emotional assistance may be engaging in unsuitable "role modelling" to their mentees. In fact, psychosocial support was found to not be helpful in the study, as supported by research undertaken by Lyness and Thompson (2000) and Metz and Tharenou (2001).

Mentoring relationships can thus be seen as an informal avenue of significant impact for female mentees. The literature highlighted that gender may also play a role in the type of learning that takes place and its subsequent impact on the learner.

### **Networking**

Networking has been found to be an essential pillar for women's ways of learning and success in achieving career aspirations, and exclusion from networks can be a hindrance to their advancement. Learning research conducted by Ely et al. (2011) demonstrated that developing successful leaders encompassed leading leadership programs that highlighted the depth of relationships, networking, and sponsorship. Networking was found critical for success (Ibarra et al., 2013). Similarly, research by Sexton et al. (2014) found that networking or mentoring opportunities provided women with the possibility of increasing their learning through interactions with others. In particular, it was noted that women who had progressed to leadership roles had availed themselves of a mentoring or networking opportunity at some point in their career journey.

Barrington's (2019) research on how women know found that women participating in networking activities held a distinct advantage linked to pursuing their professional aspirations, while other researchers (Klerk & Verreynne, 2017; Porter & Woo, 2015) also acknowledged that participation in networking encouraged increased knowledge and shared ideas and career optionality.

### **Coaching**

Coaching can be seen as a vehicle that supports the transformative learning process of an individual, and it has been noted to be of value to women's learning and development. Both client and coach enter a partnership that offers a platform for inquiry and critical reflection, in which the client is invited to explore past experiences and future aspirations.

Walling's (2015) research on the role of inquiry in Executive Coaching found that "clients seem to benefit, not only from the content of their coaching relationship, but also from the process of being coached [where] some clients began using the questioning and listening skills in their own day-to-day lives" (p. 177). Participants experienced the coaches' questioning and listening as helping clients make meaning and reach insight. The researcher found that a number of participants viewed the coach's inquiry as a way of "helping clients see alternative perspective[s]" (p. 185). In the context of pursuing a personal vision, reflective inquiry can benefit from a coaching approach.

Research conducted by Boyatzis et al. (2006, 2015, 2018) and, more recently, Boyatzis et al. (2019) posited that coaching to a person's personal vision and dreams forms an essential condition and driver of sustained change in individuals. It was observed that "effective coaching relationships have been shown to be more resonant, [and that] the four experiences often associated with being in these relationships are hope through vision, caring through compassion, awareness through mindfulness, and joy through playfulness" (p. 23).

Van Oosten (2013), who studied bank executives, discovered that "coaching relationships portrayed by the PEA found that the approach intensified the impact of emotional and social intelligence on effectiveness measures and engagement of executives in their work" (p. 20). Boyatzis (2006) further determined that "the power of the ideal self, in accessing more neural circuits, more learning possibilities, and the emotional state of elation provides a fertile ground for contemplating the future" (p. 635).

The literature underscores the benefit of coaching in supporting women to understand their multiple dimensions that include but are not limited to agency, connection, purpose, and

authenticity. Coaching spurs critical reflection and, as such, can offer, through its reflective approach, a platform for self-discovery and meaning making for the coachee.

### **Learning Through Relationships**

The literature has stressed the importance of relationships in women's transformative experiences. Shared feminine perspectives and narratives have been found to be at the heart of transformative experiences. Group experiences appear extremely powerful and have life-altering consequences (Hamp, 2006). English and Irving (2012) argued for the importance of relationships in women's learning. A number of studies (Brooks and Daniluk, 1998; Buck, 2007; Mejuni, 2009; Wittman et al., 2008) have backed the assertion that relationships form an integral part of women's learning experience.

English and Peters (2012) conducted a study on eight feminist participants who represented a variety of feminist organizations in Western Canada. Of note in the study was the importance of relationships in facilitating transformation. The authors noted that role models, mentors, and critical friends appeared to be key factors in promoting transformative learning, and that "positive examples of strong women provide a source of 'disorienting dilemmas,' a catalyst for reflection that is accessible to women in all walks of life" (p. 114).

### **Learning from Experience**

Experience, as acknowledged by several scholars, plays a critical role in the transformative learning process. Kolb's (1984) described the practice of experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experiences" (p. 38).

Based on the works of Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin, each of whom highlighted the importance of experience in the learning process, Kolb's Experiential Learning Model outlined a holistic process of learning that underscores experience, perception, cognition, and behavior (McCarthy, 2016). The Experiential Learning Model is a cyclical process of learning experiences, where

learners experience four distinct steps within the cycle; experiencing, watching, thinking/modeling and applying/doing (Kolb, 1984). As individuals move through these cycles, learning through reflection is deepened. The research also demonstrated that education specialization, career decisions, personality, job positions, and cultural impact influence learning styles (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The model underpins both Dewey's (1933) and Kolb's (1984) arguments that experiences form the basis of observation and reflection, where reflection forms a crucial element in the development of the learner's knowledge. Dewey observed that while all genuine experience comes through education, "not all experiences educate and that some experiences may miseducate" (p. 25).

Critical theorists such as Brookfield (1987) advanced that reflection and discourse can support individuals in acquiring new perspectives and habits of mind, pushing through learning blocks, and gaining clarity about their assumptions.

While the above casts a wide net for all of the theories, the researcher assessed Schlossberg's (1981) 4S model, Mainero and Sullivan's (2005) KCM model and Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) components of the Ideal self-model as the most relevant frameworks for this study.

The literature has identified that informal learning channels are the most common manner in which individuals learn (Noe et al., 2013; Schurman & Beausaert, 2016). Women are able to garner knowledge and make meaning through unstructured learning gained from being in relation with and learning from others. The researcher assessed that the participants in this study learned first by first engaging in a deep self-reflective process and shared and tested their beliefs with trusted peers.

What was also noted from the literature is that personal vision alone is insufficient to reach a desired goal and not every individual identifies a personal vision over the course of their lifetime.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study resulted from the literature which the researcher explored and reviewed and which served as an interwoven structure to organize information. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) defined the conceptual framework as a supporting configuration that informs the methodological design and data collection of the research. The research questions guiding the study formed the outline of the issue explored in tandem with the researcher's experiences and assumptions related to the problem. It was also the repository for the outcomes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The framework consisted of four categories: motivation, challenges faced in relation to pursuing personal vision, how women learn, and other factors that helped or hindered the pursuit of a new desired reality. Four questions underpinned the framework to elicit information about the experiences of the women with a personal vision who have successfully transitioned to their desired reality.

The first question sought to explore the role of motivation related to women's individual quests. Bandura's extensive research, as well as the works of Locke and Latham (2002) and Boyatzis and Jack (2018), helped discern the role of self-efficacy and goal setting in the pursuit of a personal vision and subsequent transition to a desired reality.

The second question explored the challenges that women faced in embarking and transitioning to a new reality and the strategies they utilized to reach their objective. Research by Hewlett and Luce (2005) and Richie et al. (1997) on women in the workplace and women in transition identified both extrinsic and intrinsic factors as prominent challenges.



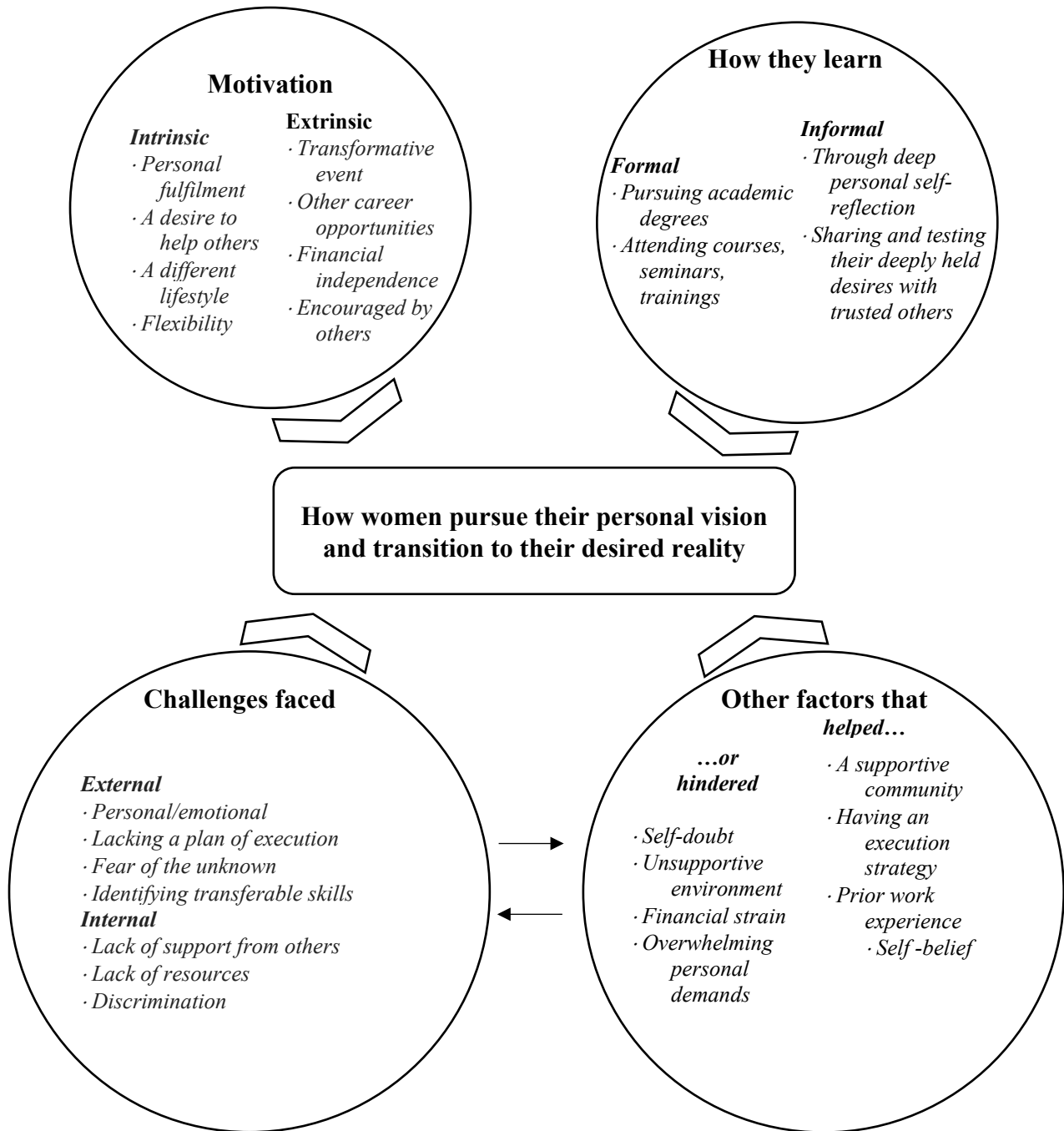
The third question addressed how women learn through formal and informal channels, and the literature on informal learning was highlighted as the primary manner in which women make meaning.

The fourth question covered other aspects that may have helped or hindered participants in their quest to pursue their personal vision and transition to a new desired reality. The conceptual framework provided a visual representation of the four topic areas, the accompanying literature, and the intersections between topics.

The study was supported by the conceptual framework which is presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

**Conceptual Framework**



## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction and Overview**

The purpose of this research was to explore with a group of women how they came to pursue their personal vision and transition to what was for them a new desired reality. These women took brave steps to turn their aspirations into a personal vision and create for themselves a new reality. However, little is known about how these women summoned the courage to act on their personal vision and whether they were fulfilled when they did.

While existing studies and articles have focused on professional discontent, none have mentioned creating a personal vision; therefore, research was warranted to understand the process these women have undergone to arrive at their desired reality. The researcher intended that this study could benefit women looking to make a transition, as well as coaches and practitioners seeking to support women's professional and personal growth. Understanding the difference in women's ability to craft a personal vision may also be useful in training practitioners on methodologies for women who seek to activate and live their personal vision. These stories may provide opportunities to educate, inspire, and motivate other women with similar ambitions.

To carry out this study, the researcher addressed the following questions:

1. How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?
2. What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?
3. How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they face?
4. What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?

This chapter outlines the approach that was taken to address the research questions. The areas covered included: (a) justification for the qualitative research approach, (b) a description of the research sample, (c) an overview of information needed, (d) an overview of the research design, (e) data collection methods, (f) data analysis and synthesis, (g) the foundation for research design and methods, (h) ethical considerations, (i) issues of trustworthiness, (j) limitations of the study, and (k) a chapter summary.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Methodology**

Qualitative research stems from “anthropology, sociology, the humanities and evaluation” (Creswell, 2014, p. 13). It offers an opportunity to witness how individuals see their world and how as “storytelling organisms” they make meaning of their storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) described this as a “broad approach to the study of social phenomenon...pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in people’s lived experiences. [It is] typically enacted in natural settings, focuses on context, and is emergent and evolving” (pp. 30-31). A qualitative study may provide individuals with the opportunity to “seek understanding of the world in which they live and...develop subjective meanings of their experiences...that are varied and multiple” (p. 8).

This researcher chose to adopt a qualitative approach and apply a case study methodology to explore each woman’s individual journey and give her the opportunity to share her lived personal experience. The goal of the study was to capture in the women’s words how they experienced and viewed the events of their lives.

## **Rationale for Case Study Methodology**

Case study methodology is viewed as one of the five major types of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) portray case study research as an exploratory methodology involving a comprehensive description of the environment and its participants followed by an in-depth analysis of the data for themes and patterns. Yin (2009) underscores three elements to consider when embarking on a research study: (a) the nature of the questions to be explored, (b) the researcher's locus of control and where the focus is situated, and (c) whether the study is current or historical.

Given the nature of the study, the researcher elected to explore a modified case study methodology to bring to life women's stories. The modified case study approach entailed obtaining data through triangulation involving semi-structured interviews, a review of documents, and a virtual focus group of women who have not yet transitioned to their desired reality.

The researcher embarked on this study because there is minimal research on the problem, and the goal was to learn about the characteristics and behaviors of this group of women as well as their frames of reference. The aim of the research was to explore and gain insights into how the participants made meaning of their individual experiences in transitioning to what for them was a new desired reality.

While portraiture was also explored, the size of the study sample eliminated the ability to embark on an in-depth study of these women's stories and it was not characteristic of an approach for this sample size. Lightfoot Lawrence (2005) highlighted that "the process of creating narrative portraits requires a difficult (sometimes paradoxical) vigilance to empirical description and aesthetic expression and a careful scrutiny and modulation of voice. It is a

discerning, deliberative process and a highly creative one” (p. 9). The researcher is seen as the artist and, as such, employs an aesthetic approach to meaning-making (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In this regard, a modified case study was a preferred approach as the women were the key storytellers in their shared experiences.

### **The Research Sample**

The research sample was comprised of 24 college-educated women from various backgrounds and industry sectors who have transitioned to their new desired reality. In addition, a focus group was conducted that was comprised of six college-educated women who have not as yet transitioned to their desired reality. The sample was purposeful, providing the researcher with the opportunity to seek information-rich narratives (Patton, 1990, 2002). In a purposeful approach, the researcher “decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience” (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). The focus was on individuals who could share a breadth of knowledge as related to their individual experiences. As such, this researcher’s intent was to portray a particular perspective in depth, not to generalize to another situation or context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

In identifying the sample, the researcher aimed to include women from diverse geographical backgrounds, who have earned college degrees and identified as having had a personal vision and left a secured position to transition to their desired reality. The researcher also identified a virtual focus group of six women who had identified a personal vision but were not yet living their life of choice. They were not interviewed individually but participated in a virtual group discussion moderated by the researcher.

In-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection. Ahead of interviews, the researcher sent an email as well as a consent form to prospective participants who were asked to return the document once they reviewed it in full. The researcher also requested biographical information from each participant to complete the demographic data for the study. Sixty-minute interviews were conducted over Zoom, a virtual platform, and transcribed in full utilizing Rev.com.

The secondary source of data was obtained through a virtual focus group comprised of six women who were part of the study but not individually interviewed and have not, as yet, transitioned to their desired reality.

The third source of data was a document review of participant information captured through relevant public documents such as LinkedIn, the participants' CVs, and social media documentation such as Facebook and Instagram.

### **Overview of Information Needed**

Four distinct categories were explored that covered the information needed for the study and helped frame answers to the research problem.

#### ***Contextual Data***

Contextual data refer to the circumstances in which participants inhabit or work. To gain insight into the learning behaviors of women who have successfully transitioned to their desired new reality, the researcher gleaned information from their CVs, LinkedIn profiles, and social media channels. Interviews were the primary method of data collection; the secondary source of data was the virtual focus group, and the third source was document review.

#### ***Perceptual Data***

Information was collected through one-on-one interviews, a virtual focus group, and document review, which in combination sought to explore:

- what their visions were and how they got constructed,
- what challenges they faced along the way,
- how they identified and overcame those challenges,
- how they decided what was required to transition to their desired reality,
- how and what they learned formally or informally, and
- other factors that helped or hindered their transition.

The in-depth interviews explored participants' perceptions of their transition and probed for learning along the way and how it contributed, if at all, to their trajectory. The virtual focus group was intended to provide additional information as related to obstacles to transition. The virtual focus group offered an alternative viewpoint and experience to the research problem and, alongside the document review, helped triangulate the data.

### ***Demographic Data***

The researcher used a demographic inventory to collect each participant's information, which included: age, nationality, ethnicity, marital status, children and/or dependents, location, education (degrees), current status/role and desired role, and length of time to transition to their new status-position. The demographic inventory served as the foundation for analyzing the data (see Appendix C).

### ***Theoretical Data***

Throughout the study, the researcher referred to the literature review that was identified as related to the topic of personal vision. The research/er explored two main areas: women in career transition and adult learning theory. This intersection provided a framework for an understanding of the phenomenon of career and life transition from an adult learning perspective.



Women in Life/Career Transitions provided a backdrop to issues that women face in relation to career and life transition choices. Reference was made to recent research on the subject and the ways in which women were navigating their lives within the context of their personal vision. The following subheadings under Women in Career/Life Transitions were explored: women's ways of knowing, challenges women face, career and life transition theories, career success, personal vision, self-efficacy, and barriers and bridges to transition.

The topic of Adult Learning Theory placed emphasis on how women learn. This section made reference to the manner in which learning takes place and outlined the different ways in which it was observed in women in transition. It covered primarily informal and non-formal learning under the following subheadings: how women learn, transformative learning, self-directed learning, reflection, mentoring, networking, coaching, learning through relationships and dialogue, and learning from experience.

### **Overview of Research Design**

The steps taken to complete the study are outlined as follows:

***Defining the Research Topic:*** The researcher chose a topic of personal interest given her work as a coach and trainer and former HR professional. Her focus of coaching women in transition led her to explore this theme through an adult learning lens and women's career ambitions perspective.

***Literature Review:*** The researcher conducted an in-depth review of the literature that provided context and an overview of what is known of the topic in question. The information supported the development of the conceptual framework. In this regard, two major themes were explored that formed the basis of this study: Women in Life/Career Transitions and Adult Learning

Theory. This approach helped the researcher add to the literature on the body of knowledge related to the topic of personal vision.

***Preliminary Identification of Sample Participants:*** The researcher drew from a pool of diverse women from women's networks as well as through her personal network of women. Prospective interviewees were contacted via email to gauge their interest in participating in this research.

***Proposal Hearing:*** The researcher held her proposal hearing in October 2020 with her advisor and second reader. In the lead-up to October, she worked closely with her advisor for any adjustments that needed to be made ahead of the hearing.

***IRB Approval:*** Upon completion of the proposal hearing, the researcher finalized and submitted all documents required for submission to Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval.

***Letter of Invitation and Consent:*** Once IRB's approval was received, the researcher shared the following documents with potential participants:

- an invitation letter that outlined the purpose of the research as well as interview information;
- a consent form which explained the approach regarding confidentiality and data collection methods;
- Participant's Rights, a document that gives each potential interviewee information on her rights as related to the study.

***Demographic Inventory:*** Participants who agreed to take part in the research were asked to complete a Demographic Inventory before the start of the interviews and learning/virtual focus group.

**Document Review:** All relevant documents such as participants' CVs, LinkedIn profiles, and public documents (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) were reviewed.

**Primary Interviews:** The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 volunteers via Zoom, a virtual platform, each interview lasting approximately one hour in length. The interview protocol is included as Appendix E.

**Interview Transcription and Coding:** Each interview, which was conducted via the virtual medium Zoom, was recorded and transcribed by the researcher via rev.com.

**Learning/Virtual Focus Group:** The researcher conducted a learning/virtual focus group via Zoom, a virtual platform, with six participants for a duration of up to 60 minutes, in which she asked two predetermined questions. The focus of this session was on women with a personal vision, who have not, as yet, transitioned to their new desired reality. The session was recorded and transcribed by the researcher via rev.com.

**Inter-Rater Reliability:** The researcher identified two additional partners to code interviews and compare data to ensure inter-rater reliability.

**Data Analysis and Synthesis:** The researcher collected information from the interviews and Demographic Inventory and analyzed findings, both individually and collectively. Data garnered from the virtual focus group were compared to the interview data. The Conceptual Framework served as a point of reference for the coding, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the findings.

**Findings, Analysis, Recommendations, and Conclusion:** The data were synthesized in a manner that responded to the research problem. The researcher presented the findings to identify themes and patterns and address the research study. Recommendations and conclusions were also presented, based on the outcome of the findings and in parallel with the literature on the topic.

## **Methods of Data Collection**

Utilizing multiple media for the collection of data was essential to provide a thorough analysis of the issue examined in the study as well as to reduce any potential bias. The process known as triangulation is aimed at “reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 72).

Yin (2003) and Patton (1990) asserted that the use of multiple collection approaches to augment data credibility is the cornerstone of case study research. Creswell (2009) added that triangulation also serves to validate themes surfacing from the data under review. The merging of the different media adds weight to the findings because the many strands of data are “braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554).

For this study, interviews were the primary data collection method, followed by a learning/virtual focus group and a document review. The method for collecting data was as follows: (a) interviews with 24 women, (b) a learning/virtual focus group with six women, and (c) document review.

### **Interviews**

The primary research methodology used for this study was interviews, which allowed for a broad range of descriptions and unique perspectives on meaning-making experiences (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Maxwell (2013) posited that by capturing “real-life experiences,” the process is key to drawing out individual insights and knowledge.

Interviews are powerful vehicles for facilitating the exploration of topics in depth (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Interviews covering the gamut from “the structured and controlled to the unstructured and fluid, can elicit rich information about personal experiences and perspectives [as well as allowing] for spontaneity, flexibility, and responsiveness to individuals”

(Carter et al., 2014, p. 545). Conducting in-depth interviews leaves room for spontaneous answers as well as limited time lapse between the questions and the participants' responses (Opdenakker, 2006). Yin (2009), in addition, theorized that interviews are the most significant methods of collecting data for research in that they can extend beyond a specific period of time. However, there are some limitations to the interview approach.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) described the research interview as *person dependent* with the process leaving interpretation in the researcher's court (p. 198). Thornborrow (2002) advanced that power in conversation is a continuous shift between researcher and interviewer. Interviewees bring their own worldview into the discussion and how that is interpreted and addressed forms part of the fabric of the data. Creswell (2009) posited that participants' responses may be filtered by their own perspective; moreover, they may be challenged in articulating their thoughts, and the researcher's presence may indirectly affect how participants choose to respond—for example, by seeking to impress the researcher. Power dynamics also may come into play, with the researcher and participant navigating the power shifts at different moments during the interview.

Anyan (2013) denoted that the researcher possesses the study's subject matter while the interviewee holds the lived experience and unique perspective. He further expressed that during “the analysis stage, the interviewer maintains an exclusive privilege to report what the interviewee meant,” thus maintaining a form of power imbalance (p. 6). To counter the imbalance, Anyan proposed that “to control for the power imbalances in data collection and analysis, an interviewer may systematically study the research process to uncover the maneuverings of power. During the analysis, the interviewer may look at the interview situation

from several perspectives to reflect on his or her own dynamisms within the circumstances of the interview.” (p. 7).

For the purposes of the study, the researcher arranged in-depth interviews with 24 female participants. The researcher sought to explore each woman’s experience of pursuing a personal vision and transitioning to their desired future reality. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted up to 1 hour. A protocol (see Appendix E) was used to maintain objectivity and consistency.

Interviews took place over Zoom, a video conferencing facility, in order to have the possibility of digitally recording the conversations. These interviews were held at a time of the participant’s choosing, in line with the researcher’s dissertation timeline. Upon completion of each interview, it was transcribed using the services of rev.com.

In order to supplement the research, a learning/virtual discussion group was organized to further add to the breadth of viewpoints and experiences.

### **Virtual Focus Group Discussion**

The role of the virtual focus group was to present an opportunity for open and truthful conversation around the topic in question. It is a discussion dedicated to one theme (Kreuger, 2014). The discussion focused on identifying the women’s personal vision and reflecting on what was holding them back from transitioning to their desired reality. Triangulation is a method in which multiple data sources are utilized to gain a broad understanding of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 1999). Virtual groups are an example of triangulating data in qualitative inquiry, where “triangulation involves the collection of data from different types of people, including individuals, groups, families, and communities, to gain multiple perspectives and validation of data” (Carter et al., 2014, p. 545).

In virtual groups in particular, participants witness each other's comments and engage in a dialogue prompted by what is being shared in the discussion. Morgan (1996) noted that participant interactions that prompt the sharing of lived experiences on the same topic are key to the success of the virtual focus group. Kvale and Brinkmann (2007) underscored that virtual groups provide a vehicle for conveying a multitude of viewpoints on one topic where an exchange of perspectives is sought, rather than agreement and consensus building. Discussion groups offer the advantage, according to Hennick (2014), of building on the insights of others.

Virtual groups also present limitations. Research by Kruger et al. (2019) on women's verbalization about delicate and personal matters found that interviewees shared more personal insights and feelings than those in learning groups. The findings suggested that one-on-one interviews may offer women a safer atmosphere for them to share their lived experiences.

Fontana and Fey (2000) noted that group dynamics may engender group think, where participants approach the discussion based on their comfort level and engagement in the conversation and, thus, may not be as participative as others in the group.

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), care must be taken to urge all participants to express themselves and to monitor those who may overshadow the discussion. As the researcher oversees the conversation, attention must also be paid to ensuring the conversation remains on topic; the researcher must be skilled in moderating open-ended discussions (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

To establish an open and inviting dialogue, the researcher distributed a protocol outlining the norms that underpinned the conversation (see Appendix G). A virtual focus group was convened of six women who have a personal vision but have not, as yet, transitioned to their new

desired reality. The aim was to supplement the information gathered and to add more data to ensure trustworthiness and credibility to the study

## **Document Review**

Utilizing document review as a third research option allows a researcher the opportunity to reduce bias by validating data that emerged from the virtual focus group discussion and interviews (Bowen, 2009). For this study, additional data were collected through document review. Bowen (2009) advanced that “document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted material)” (p. 28). Yin (1994) noted that document analysis is well suited for qualitative research, and Merriam (1988) emphasized that “documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p. 118).

Document review presents advantages and limitations. Robson and McCartan (2017) found documents to not be disruptive because they do not necessitate the presence of the participant nor do they require being interviewed during the process. Bowen (2009) identified some advantages: availability in that they are easily obtainable, and cost effectiveness and efficiency that “requires data selection, instead of data collection” (p. 31).

Limitations include insufficient detail in the document and biased selectivity when insufficient information may be available. Robson and McCartan (2017) noted that documents may reflect biases because they are not developed from a research perspective. Yin (2009) elaborated that document review can possibly lack enough information to respond to a research question as the document is independent of the researcher’s study.

Within the context of this study, document review provided a medium through which the researcher could examine supplementary data and new insights could be gleaned from the



material. The review also allowed for additional discernment of the participants' experiences and stories, as told from their perspective. To counter these limitations, the researcher reviewed CVs and social media channels and looked to have the most recent documents pertaining to the participants' lives.

Similar to other approaches that straddle public and private life, social media could qualify as being an ethically risky area of research (Nind et al., 2012). Lunnay et al. (2015) found that their success "in using social media ethically depended on ensuring participants understood that the Facebook friendship was solely for research purposes" (p. 8). They also noted that because social media for research was still "ethically unproven," the "burden of proof of ethical practice [lies] with the researcher" (p. 8). Lunnay et al. applied the principles of integrity, respect, and beneficence in conducting research.

In alignment with that approach, the present researcher requested permission to view the participants' profile on social media channels, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn by sharing a consent form and also explicitly making them aware of the privacy expectations related to the inclusion of social media for research purposes.

Table 1 demonstrates the type of information needed for this study and how the researcher proceeded to collect it.

**Table 1*****Matrix: Overview of Required Information***

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Information Needed</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
1. How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?	Women's perception/understanding of personal vision	Semi-structured interview	Interviews will discern individual perceptions, understanding of personal vision
2. What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?	Blockages, internal, external, cultural, social or other?	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews will discern the elements that hinder the transition process
3. How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they face? What learning they gained related to meeting the challenges?	Women's approaches to pursuing their passion	Semi-structured interviews	Interviews will discern individual approaches
4. What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?	Additional blockages, internal, external, cultural, social, or other?	Semi-structured interviews Virtual focus group Social media	The virtual group concentrated on women who have not, as yet, transitioned to their desired reality. This information was needed to cross-check and triangulate the data.
5. Demographics	Age, ethnicity, location, job title, level of education	Document review Semi-structured interviews Virtual focus group	To provide a background and contextual data to frame the study relevant to the literature review

## Data Analysis and Synthesis

There are different approaches in which qualitative data can be analyzed, and decisions need to be made for which approach will best inform the rest of the study (Maxwell, 2013). The present researcher chose to follow Creswell's methodology to review and organize the data derived from the stories, and then to further analyze and synthesize the findings. Creswell (2014) outlined a six-stage approach to that effect: 1) the organization and preparation of data for analysis involving interview transcription (writing field notes and sorting out data), 2) reviewing the data and scanning for themes and meaning, 3) coding the data by "bracketing chunks" (text segments), 4) producing descriptions of the participants or setting as well as themes/categories to be analyzed, 5) establishing how the narrative and themes will be represented, 6) interpreting the findings and their meanings.

In preparing and organizing the data obtained from 24 interviews, the researcher used the transcription service rev.com to capture the story of each participant. For accuracy, the researcher listened to the recordings in parallel with reviewing the transcription and also checked in with participants for understanding and insights. Saldaña (2009) noted that most methodologies recommend in-depth reading of the data while noting down thoughts and ideas for topics, patterns, or themes. As the researcher reviewed the transcripts, she wrote memos, captured personal reflections, and highlighted themes that emerged from the individual narratives.

The next step was to examine the themes and classify the data into categories to refine the information through a process that Creswell (1998) referred to as "winnowing," or distilling the data into smaller segments. The researcher chose to code manually, as a way to have more autonomy over the work. Saldaña (2009) observed, "there is something about manipulating

qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that give you more control over and ownership of the work” (p. 22). The researcher opted for an open coding system, developing codes based on the actual language of the participants. Saldaña also referred to coding as a “cyclical act,” where additional cycles of recoding help filter and emphasize key themes, which often lead to coding sentences using the participants’ exact language (termed *in vivo*).

The process of reducing the data included “questioning the data,” labelling the data, and creating codes to explain patterns, then aligning them with categories of the Conceptual Framework without “forcing” the data. Although the Conceptual Framework categories were obtained *deductively* from the literature, they were updated as themes and patterns emerged from the data. The Conceptual Framework thus remained flexible to allow participants to share their lived experience. This iterative process allowed for findings and meanings to emerge, allowing the researcher to update certain categories and deleting others that did not emerge from the data.

While all of the data were captured, in some instances, participants spoke about topics that were not relevant to the research; thus, those data were excluded. As outlined in Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), the researcher took particular notice of her presumptions when reviewing the analysis to ensure that she was being informed by the data, not her preconceptions. Please see Appendix F for the coding scheme.

In an effort to establish inter-rater reliability, to see how closely the codes were aligned, the researcher provided two AEGIS colleagues with a complete transcript of the same interview along with the coding legend to determine the extent to which the coding done individually was consistent. The first colleague arrived at 95% agreement. The second colleague arrived at 70% agreement, a considerably lesser consensus than the first colleague. The researcher convened a

meeting to discuss the discrepancies with the coding legend. During the discussion, the differences were reconciled, and the researcher and AEGIS colleagues arrived at a consensus.

The summary of the data can be found in Chapter IV and the synthesized data are discussed in Chapter V (Analysis, Discussion, and Synthesis).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations form the cornerstone of privacy and confidentiality. For any study, the priority lies in informing participants of the research process as well as protecting them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

In alignment with the Teachers College's IRB process, the approach taken was focused on the protection of individual privacy. To that effect, all data were kept confidential; to further protect individual privacy, all names were changed to ensure strict confidentiality.

The women identified to take part in the study were contacted to confirm voluntary interest in taking part in the study. A Consent Form (see Appendix A) outlining the process was shared with the participants and included the option to withdraw at any given point in time.

The researcher took data collection measures that ensured continued privacy and confidentiality, including: keeping files in a secure location, ensuring that documents were data-protected, and deleting all files permanently after a 3-year period.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Any research study necessitates a way to ensure the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of the topic under review. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) pivotal work identified a set of criteria to evaluate qualitative research by suggesting that studies reach "trustworthiness" by showcasing as close as reasonably possible the participants' viewpoints. They addressed this issue by focusing on four elements that emerge in naturalistic inquiry: credibility, dependability, confirmability,

and transferability. Lietz et al. (2006) further noted that “as stated by Padgett (1998) trustworthiness is not something that just naturally occurs, but instead is the result of ‘rigorous scholarship’ that includes the use of defined procedures” (p. 444).

Strategies employed to minimize threats to trustworthiness, as outlined by Lietz et al. (2006), include: “prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, negative case analysis, audit trail and reflexivity (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Horsburgh, 2003; Johnson and Waterfield, 2004; Li, 2004; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Mauther and Doucet, 2003; Padgett, 1998)” (Lietz et al. 2006, p. 444).

Horsburgh (2003) defined reflexivity as “active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation” (p. 308). Reflexivity plays an essential role in the meaning-making process because it is through this process that the researcher can deliberate the influence of his/her presence (Lietz et al., 2006).

### **Credibility**

The criteria of credibility check whether conclusions are “accurate and credible” from all three parties involved: the author, the participants, and the reviewer (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Methodological validity encompasses observing the rationale between the questions being asked and the explanation developed by the researcher. Seale (2002) posited, “if there is one thing that produces poor studies, it is a researcher who is blind to the methodological consequences of research decisions” (p. 108).

To augment the methodological validity of the research, the researcher applied data triangulation to the study. Triangulating data sources “yields a fuller and richer picture of the phenomenon under review” and allows for a heightened focus on quality and rigor (Bloomberg

& Volpe, 2008, p. 86). It is a “qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources” (Carter et al., 2014, p. 545).

For this study, the researcher collected information through interviews, a virtual focus group, and document review. The researcher also shared all pertinent documents with participants to ensure transparency, consistency, and rigor throughout the process. In addition, the researcher documented through notetaking any observations of biases and assumptions that arose during the research. Lietz et al. (2006) pointed out that “if we do not consider the ways in which who we are may get in the way of portraying the voice of the participant, we may miss important meanings that are being presented by our participants” (p. 448).

### **Dependability**

Dependability “seeks means for taking into account both factors of instability and factors of phenomenal or design induced changes” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 299). Thus, the pursuit for dependability of research findings must tackle both aspects.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) affirmed that evidence of credibility establishes the dependability of qualitative research. To supplement that approach, the researcher maintained an “audit trail” by seeking two additional colleagues to code the data garnered from interviews and establish inter-reliability. The audit trail catalogued the researcher’s ongoing reflexive work, documented through journaling, memo writing, and field notes throughout the process. An audit trail ensures rigor in the research and outlines the methods undertaken throughout the process (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004; Padgett, 1998). The researcher also offered “transparency of method” (Merriam & Associates, 2002) by tracking and maintaining transcriptions, drafts, voice recordings, interview notes, and personal reflections for several years.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the capacity of others to substantiate or validate the results (Drisko, 1997). It equates to “the notion of objectivity in qualitative research,” where the researcher is tasked with identifying the “decision trail” and being able to demonstrate that the conclusions result from the research rather than from biases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 87).

Confirmability is established when a study demonstrates that the data and the study are interrelated. Methods used for this approach include “member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails” (Lietz & Zayas, 2010, p. 197); negative case analysis is also used to negate evidence. Creswell and Miller (2000) observed that the approach is beneficial for constructivist research. Drisko (1997) posited that obtaining contradictory evidence and a wide range of experiences is essential in providing a thorough overview of the research.

## **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the “way in which the reader determines whether and to what extent this particular phenomenon in this particular context can transfer to another context” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 87). Marshall and Rossman (2014) elaborated that it is under the purview of the reader as opposed to the researcher to make that transfer of findings applicable to another context.

The application of rich, thick, and in-depth descriptions of context as well as multi-site designs will increase the transferability of the findings to other situations (Merriam, 2009; Schram, 2003). As noted by Creswell and Miller (2000):

the purpose of thick description is that it creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feelings that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study. Thus, credibility is established through the lens of readers who read a narrative account and are transported into a setting or situation. (pp. 128-129)



This allows for the application of an interpretation to other circumstances being studied for research purposes.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of a study are multifold, and the researcher sought to address these limitations by tackling the most common issues that arise in qualitative research: researcher bias, participant reactivity, reliance on retrospective recall, and the sampling strategy. Each is reviewed in brief.

#### **Researcher Bias**

The researcher has personally pursued her personal vision and transitioned to her desired new reality. It was thus incumbent upon her to ensure that her assumptions be stated from the onset of the study. To that effect, she identified and noted these assumptions in Chapter I and maintained a personal journal to document personal thoughts and observations that arose during the process. In addition, inter-rater coding helped safeguard against researcher bias. Furthermore, participant transcripts were anonymized to further limit any bias.

She took note that she specifically interviewed predominantly English-speaking women who had identified a personal vision. As noted in Chapter I, to ensure that participants understood the meaning of personal vision, the researcher shared a verbal definition of personal vision with the candidates upon initial contact.

The women were referred to the researcher through her network and as such, the study was a purposeful one. The women were college educated and for the most part, were raised in Western cultures and of a higher socio-economic standing.

#### **Participant Reactivity**

Lietz and Zayas (2010) observe that, as noted by Padgett (1998), “to achieve credibility, qualitative research must manage the risk of research reactivity and bias” (p. 191). Research

reactivity denotes the possibility of the research process or researcher wielding influence on the participants, thus modifying the study's outcome. To overcome this issue, the researcher aimed to collect data in a less "conspicuous and intrusive" manner, without deceit (Lietz & Zayas, 2010, p. 192).

The manner in which interview questions are devised and how they are voiced, including elements such as "affirming or non-affirming non-verbal cues," may also contribute to research reactivity (Lietz et al., 2006, p. 192). To manage this issue, the researcher engaged in heightened self-awareness and remained an observer of the process. Lietz et al. (2006) found that "ongoing efforts of reflexivity were a critical way [to] manage...reactivity and bias" (p. 455). In using reflexivity, the researcher followed interview protocol, seeking follow-up questions to clarify any statements and recording all sessions to ensure that all data were collected for review.

### **Reliance on Retrospective Recall**

Research conducted by Shiffman et al. (1997) found that participants who were interviewed about a life experience could not accurately recall meaningful events after a short period of time. In a study on women's retrospective reports of their pregnancies, Weisberg et al. (2008) also found that the "recall of feelings and intentions from several decades earlier [was] likely to be affected by subsequent and current events" (p. 391).

As the narrative inquiry approach relies on retrospective recall, and in order to minimize retrospective recall bias, the researcher provided all participants ahead of the interview sessions with information pertaining to the content of the discussion. This gave participants time to prepare their narrative histories ahead of the conversation.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed account of the study's research approach. As little is known about how women pursue a personal vision and transition to their new desired reality, the

researcher used open-ended inquiry to uncover the participants' rich stories. A modified case study approach was used to understand how a group of 24 professional women came to pursue their personal vision and transition to their new desired reality.

Interviews were the primary data collection method, followed by a virtual focus group discussion and a document review. Interviews allow for a broad range of narratives and individual perspectives on meaning-making experiences and help draw out individual knowledge and insights. A virtual focus group consisting of six women who have not yet transitioned to their desired reality provided the opportunity for each participant to share her lived experience. Their revelations and insights allowed the researcher to gain further understanding of the research topic by contrasting and substantiating these findings with data obtained primarily from the interviews. To triangulate the data obtained, the researcher examined pertinent documents.

A selection of literature was reviewed to place the study within the context of what is known, thereby establishing a Conceptual Framework. The utilization of triangulation, observation of researcher bias, and peer examination tested credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

The researcher identified limitations to her research approach and shared approaches and methods taken to minimize their impact. It is hoped that the findings will be of value to women seeking personal and professional fulfillment and provide recommendations, tactics and strategies for professional coaches, educators, HR practitioners, and organizations to use as tools to support and promote women's professional growth and personal well-being.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to explore with a group of women how they came to pursue their personal vision and transition to a new desired reality. The researcher sought to shed light on this phenomenon where women transition out of an established situation to pursue a personal vision. This chapter outlines the findings that surfaced from twenty-four individual in-depth interviews based on the four research questions, as well as from the findings from the virtual learning discussion conducted with six additional participants.

The participants, who were given pseudonyms for this study, shared their stories and insights related to their lived experience of leaving an established position to pursue a personal vision. The following four research questions were addressed:

1. How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?
2. What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?
3. How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they face?
4. What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?

The four major findings that emerged through the data collected are:

1. A strong majority of participants (79%) revealed that their need for personal fulfillment was what motivated them to act on their personal vision.
2. A strong majority of participants (83%) revealed that their primary challenge to transitioning to their desired reality was linked to personal/emotional issues.
3. The vast majority of participants (92%) learned to overcome their challenges through self-reflection, rather than through formal methods.

4. All participants (100%) in this study identified having a supportive community/a supportive family as a significant helping factor in transitioning to their desired reality.

### **Finding #1**

**A strong majority of participants (79%) revealed that their need for personal fulfillment was what motivated them to act on their personal vision.**

Participants were invited to respond to the first question related to how they identified a personal vision and what experience or event led them to their personal vision. Additionally, they were asked to share their primary reason or motivation for acting on their personal vision. The primary finding from this study is that most women, as the data revealed, were intrinsically motivated to act on their personal vision. See Appendix N for a complete list of the types of motivators experienced by the women. Furthermore, Table 2 provides a summary of Finding #1 data.

**Table 2**

***Outline of Finding #1:***

**Finding #1**

A strong majority of participants (79%) revealed that their need for personal fulfillment was what motivated them to act on their personal vision.

**Participants reported the following intrinsic motivators:**

- A Desire for Personal Fulfillment (19 of 24, 79%)
- A Desire to Help Others (14 of 24, 58%)
- A Desire to Seek a Different Lifestyle (10 of 24, 42%)
  - To Emphasize Self-Care
  - To Escape Unhappiness
  - To Overcome Burnout
- A Desire for More Flexibility and Independence (10 of 24, 42%)
- The Desire to Right an Injustice (4 of 10, 17%)
- A Desire to Act on a Childhood Dream (7 of 24, 29%)
- Guided by Their Faith (2 of 24, 8%)

**Participants reported the following extrinsic motivators:**

- Experienced a Transformative Event (18 of 24, 75%)
- To Prepare for Other Career Opportunities (13 of 24, 54%)
- Encouraged by Others to Act on Their Vision (4 of 24, 17%)
- A Desire for Financial Independence (3 of 24, 13%)

## **A Desire for Personal Fulfillment**

Most participants were drawn to act on their personal vision due to a desire for self-fulfillment. Based on their responses, most women described reaching a moment in their lives often linked to their work environment where they became more attuned to a desire to live a different, more fulfilled life.

Edina, despite being a successful partner in a law firm, realized that increased success had not brought her personal contentment, but rather left her dissatisfied and searching for fulfillment.

I was a partner at my law firm, the only black woman at the entire law firm, and had the corner office. I was supervising a team of eight other lawyers. I was actually in charge of one of our satellite offices and managing one of our satellite offices. And I think even though I was at that point in my career there was this, what I described earlier as this gift of discomfort where I had. . . I kept having to press through the quote-unquote success to reach a place of fulfillment. And I thought to myself, “. . . There's no way fulfillment is supposed to be this hard to attain or to be or to realize in some ways.

Similarly, Claritta, who was living in Basel, Switzerland, and had all the life comforts she could wish for, expresses that her current setup was not one that she wanted for herself long term.

What I realized was I looked around and I'm like, "I have a nice apartment I'm renting. I have my dogs, but I didn't have the life I want." Maybe it was to do with age because I must have been 45 then. And I think it was a combination of all of those different things and I'm like, "This is the time, it's the time to do it."

Akira shares that her prior corporate role was a challenging one that rekindled her desire to follow through on her own vision of focusing on a greater purpose than herself.

My last corporate role, because it was so difficult, it reignited what originally was always there, which was [the vision] of owning my own, and building my own, and forging my own path, and really feeding the need that there was a purpose greater than me that I was here to fulfill.

Penelope, an executive coach, also expresses her desire to expand her work and her reach beyond her current organization in order to have a broader impact.

I really wanted to be contributing to more than one company, more leaders than within that same homogenous group, in a way, although the company was . . . it's the same kind of breed. I just wanted to explore . . . I wanted to broaden my mindset and my horizon, and look at what else is out there. How can you bring different thinking to people? How can you help them to think differently? But it's not just that they think differently, but then they act on it, so it's really the impact. . . that has the word 'act' in it.

Charlotte, who had been practicing law, realized that she was far more interested in business and could not see herself as a lawyer long term.

I realized that I liked business more than I liked law. I realized that what I was doing on a daily basis was not what I wanted to do, or I didn't want to continue doing it for the next 10 or 20 years. I was not in the spot where I was hoping to be at this point of my career. I remember I could spend hours studying about what all the people were doing, building things, and then I realized I was really, really jealous of seeing them do the things.

Sydney, among other participants, shares that finding oneself, one's authentic being, was extremely meaningful to her.

It was about living more authentically and true to myself, and at the same time finding something that would motivate me again. And I think the third piece, and I'm talking about criteria here, because at that time I wasn't even sure what it would look like, to have some meaning in it.

Aamori, the mother of two boys, describes the importance of being their role model and demonstrating that, in addition to being their mother, she was also a great businesswoman doing what she loved professionally.

I want my kids to see me doing something that I really love and be really successful at it. And I have two young boys, as you know. And it was important, it is important for them to see me as, not only a great mom but just like a great woman in business and kind of creating my own path. It's really important to me. Because I felt like they were just seeing me as mom. They expect me to be there for all those school events, and like the bake sale. Literally, I was hosting bake sales. And the mom who's taking pictures for all the other moms at the talent shows because no one else could be there. And I was like, I love that. But I was like, I got so much more in me that I want to do.

Some participants shared pursuing a long-held vision as their reason for their transition.

Mandy explains her dream of having a farm. "My personal vision was always around living on a farm and being financially secure to be able to focus my time with the horses." She later reveals



the reason why she felt the need to be financially stable. “I also was just very driven, I think, to be not struggling financially because I watched my parents struggle.”

Only one participant, Dahab, mentions fear of failure as a motivator to act on her vision. “Fear has been such a motivator for me. I outperform because I'm afraid of failing. I work hard because I'm afraid of being bored and lazy.”

### **A Desire to Help Others**

58% of participants felt a calling to help, support and empower others. Linda reflects on her desire to aid children. “I knew that this was my long-term vision of wanting to be the person that could help children.” Magdalena’s sentiments were similar. “I really wanted to be able to facilitate reflection, to help people live fulfilling lives. For them to feel empowered to do that.”

In reminiscing about her childhood, Edina shares how her upbringing, which was dedicated to service, reinforced her desire to help others.

I grew up with parents who were very intentional about the impact of human life on the world, right? And so, from a very young age, I saw my parents really mirror what life well lived and what service to humanity actually looks like. And so, we grew up really with the idea that a life that wasn't invested in the development of the people around you or the community around you was ultimately wasted in some ways.

Some participants expressed a deep desire to support women in particular. Chloe describes her strong desire to provide equal opportunities to women, particularly women of color.

Where I did feel passion, where I did have vision even with the firm, was developing talent and investing in our pipeline, and giving equal opportunities in particular to women and people of color.

Yumi echoes Chloe’s sentiment when discussing the need to give back to women. “And that's one of the reasons why I wanted to do this work so that I could give voice and empower, especially, the female faculty.”

A focus group participant similarly expresses her vision to create an online platform to support women.

So, my vision is to continue to create an online platform for women, a safe and judgment-free space for women to learn, to explore themselves, to connect with themselves, connect with others, and have access to resources and tools that allows them to create the positive shifts in their lives in which they seek. And so, I'm doing it now, it was in the life prior to COVID and then we shifted to a digital platform, which has actually been great because now we're global, the silver linings [of] our reach is much greater.

Another focus group participant also describes her vision of teaching women technical skills in order to create entrepreneurial opportunities for them.

So, my vision is to basically help women with more technical skills to be able to have better entrepreneurial opportunities. So basically, teaching them how to make clothes, how to make soap, make lotion, how to do basket weaving, jewelry, so that they can earn a better living than breaking rocks for their daily bread. And so, the steps that I have taken, I have a building now, in Sierra Leone, I have equipment that actually shipped out yesterday so that we can start small. But I just want to be able to have [an] impact even if it's just, 10 women, 20 women, but I just want to have a bigger impact on a few lives rather than trying to save thousands of women, because then that would help me feel satisfied with my efforts because too many of them still stay in the same situation.

Two participants highlighted their wish to support underserved populations. Nora describes her attentiveness to supporting others with restricted access to broader opportunities.

I think that when I look back at my journey, my vision shifted. I think the common theme is that it always started with an awareness of trying to empower or support individuals who maybe had less access to broader opportunity and who were maybe out of the mainstream.

Rose shares how her daughter's diagnosis triggered her decision to start a non-profit organization inclusive of all children.

We started this non-profit called Project Inclusion, which is basically inclusive of all kids; regardless of ability, gender, race, everything. But it stemmed from obviously my daughter's diagnosis.

### **A Desire to Seek a Different Lifestyle**

10 out of 24 participants (42%) mentioned seeking a different lifestyle as a source of motivation to transition to their personal vision.

Mandy outlines her vision of the lifestyle she was seeking, which included living in the countryside, having more space, and being surrounded by dogs and a horse.

You know what, our vision was actually living in the country. Having space, living in the country and being able to hike and have our dogs and have a horse. *And it was more of a lifestyle.*

A few women spoke of unhappiness as a reason for the impetus for change. Reka looks back on how she became aware of her discontentment. “I just noticed that a lot of things that I was doing, it wasn't making me happy, and it wasn't advancing me towards anything.”

Claritta, in particular, recalls her stressful work environment, how her life revolved solely around work and waiting for the weekend.

I love the house I had, and I hated Basel. All I was doing was really stressful, working in a very stressful work environment because of politics. Earning a lot of money, being successful to be fair, doing a good job, it wasn't all bad but literally my days were, it was nothing but work. So, I'd get up in the morning, I had Bowie then. Just got my first dog, got up in the morning, had to pay somebody to look after her, work God knows how many hours. Used to get back. . . I didn't even go off the campus because I have a supermarket in the campus of PharmaCorp. So, used to buy my food at that supermarket, get home, microwave some food, [in] half an hour go to bed. Day after day and all I was doing was waiting for the weekend.

Dahab found herself in a work environment that was slow by design, where there was no sense of impact, leaving her feeling disillusioned and unhappy.

That the organization is just slow by design, in a way was a trigger point that is like, "Okay, so I'm here, I'm living my initial vision, but I'm just not happy and I don't feel I have a sense of impact. If I'm trying to be a positive force and an influencer in whatever I'm doing, I actually, I'm just surviving and struggling.

Some women sought a different lifestyle due to having experienced burnout. Kristina shares how her burnout was the catalyst for her to make a change.

I really burnt out, [and] that really pushed me to . . . because it was a really big decision to make that leap because the thing is, once you move from working in corporate law, then you go to a non-profit world, you are not going back.

Similarly, Sydney, having also experienced burnout, explained that she took time off to get into a healthy mental and physical space.

I did decide to take a few months and do nothing. I didn't have, I had urgency, but I also was so burned out that I really gave myself the space to take some time off, so to speak. And it made a good transition because in my case, with having burnout and everything, I used the time [for] nutrition, health, exercise, all that stuff that can be a job in itself. And so that fit very well to physically and mentally get into a space where you can even be creative about what's next.

### **A Desire for More Flexibility and Independence**

10 out of 24 women (42%) identified flexibility, freedom, and independence as strong motivators that led them to pursue their personal vision.

Saanvi shares that being free was of utmost importance to her. “Freedom, it's like freedom of creating. Freedom of working on what I want, freedom of choosing the direction in which I want to develop something. That's what I was looking for. Freedom and space.”

Nora, in recounting her experience at her former organization, highlighted her desire to have freedom of choice and not be forced to make compromises that went against her integrity.

I got to the age maybe and my state in my career where I didn't want to make compromises. And or at least I wanted, maybe I shouldn't say that, I wanted to choose the compromises that I was willing to make. And in the organization, I was forced to make compromises that didn't fit with my integrity. And I didn't feel it was in the best interest of the mission of both whom I was serving in terms of the leaders but also the children. So, I think ultimately, that was my motivation. I wanted the freedom to pick to say no.

Belinda also wishes to be untethered from an office and experience freedom and flexibility.

It was more a vision of what I didn't want than what I wanted, although I'll say, it was a little bit of both, but I wanted more freedom in my life and *I wanted to kind of have an “A la carte life”* I'll say. And the nature of my job before that, the full-time, kind of being tethered to an office, to a holding company, and then two bosses within my company. And the layers of management sort of kept me tethered, didn't allow for that kind of the more flexible life that I wanted.

Charlotte was motivated by a desire to start her own business to have complete flexibility, particularly if she were to start a family.

When I was still employed at Campbells, before I started networking, I was complaining, and I was saying, Oh, I'm so unhappy, and I was saying, Well, if I could have my own little business that takes me a few hours a day, that'd be ideal. This way, if someday we have a baby, then I have complete flexibility.

### **A Desire to Act on a Childhood Dream**

7 out of 24 participants (29%) mentioned that pursuing their personal vision was the result of living out their childhood dream. Kristina explains that her sensitivity and her compassion for her vision; working in animal rights, started as a child, where she would pick up stuffed animals in toy stores that had fallen into the aisles.

I really think my vision and personal goals started when I was young. And I think I was just born. . . I'm a highly sensitive person, I have abundance, in some ways I'm overly empathic, I think. Things like if I saw a stuffed animal at a toy store that had fallen into the aisle off the shelf, I felt bad and I put it back. So too much, a little too much. And I don't think animals are undeserving of empathy so, but I think I had this natural compassion for them. So, no event sparked it. I think I was just born that way.

Similarly, Akira explains that since childhood, she had a vision of always doing whatever she wanted to do and that she always believed she would own her own business.

I was born with this vision that I could always do whatever I wanted to do. That was great as an adult, but as a child, got me in quite a bit of challenging situations, just with following the rules, abiding by what the expectations of others were, especially in positions of authority. So, from a small child, I always believed that I was going to own my own business.

Aamori, recounting her love of fashion, enthusiastically describes her childhood dream of being a model. "There was an opportunity for me to come here to New York to pursue modeling, it was very innately in me because I've always wanted to do that and be in the fashion world since I was little." Mandy, as she shared the story of her horse farm, also warmly recalls her dream of owning a horse. "And I knew at some point in my life, and I had hoped it would have been as a kid, but I have always had it in my mind that I wanted a horse."

## **A Desire to Right an Injustice**

7 out of 24 participants (29%) expressed the need to right an injustice as a strong motivator to act on their personal vision. Some women were drawn to human rights issues, such as Edina, who shares that coming from a culture where systematic justice against women prevailed, drove her to envision access and dignity for all women.

And I think coming from a culture where women were intentionally prevented from having access, whether it was systemic injustice that was written into our laws, into our customs and traditions, in the form of patriarchy, education of women, ultimately at the end of the day, that limited the access of women to be the full form of who God intended them to be as a bearer of the image and likeness of God. And so, in my mind I always had this picture that coupled access with dignity, and I envisioned the two of them coming together even though I didn't know exactly how that would translate in the real world but that was always in the back of my mind. And Adena and I would talk about it from when we first met each other in the year 2001, I think it was. And she was one of the people I would say that was placed in my path to consistently remind me of what my ultimate vision was.

A focus group participant shares similar sentiments. As a practicing medical doctor in Nigeria, she found herself disheartened by the lack of rights and medical access available to the population, prompting her to develop her vision of helping to shape global health policies.

When I was a young doctor in Nigeria, which was the first thing I wanted to be as a little girl, my father and grandfather were physicians. So that was a big dream of mine. But when I was actually practicing, I saw several things that I found that were disheartening to say the least, or even mildly traumatic in terms of just the lack of access and how sick people would get before they actually got care. And it really wasn't about clinical acumen or expertise, the problems were systemic. They were structural, they were big global health funding issues. They were issues of access. They were issues of rights. They were issues of empowerment. They were issues of gender discrimination. And so that gave birth to my second vision, which was, where can I put myself where I have the opportunity to shape global health policy around, for instance, marital rape and the criminalization of marital rape. Because I come from a country where this is not a crime, a man can rape his wife and there's no legal repercussions, things like that.

Another focus group participant also mentions wanting to see an inclusive and sustainable economy. “For me, an inclusive and sustainable economy is my vision, where

women would have their fair share of the wealth on the planet. Now we have 10%, so we have 40% to go to get a 50. So that's my vision”

Rose recounts her experience as a parent of a child with Down syndrome and the dismay she felt after her child was excluded from extra-curricular activities at school, which ultimately led her to her vision for change.

What was lacking in her school was, she was the only child with Down syndrome. . . which is rare, I mean, Down syndrome kids are integrated. And so, I started to really look at the school, and what was missing, and she wasn't included in a lot of afterschool programs, or extracurricular activities. And so, I started to get really upset. I was like, "Why isn't she? What is it like?" I was like, well, how is she different than this kid who doesn't need it, playing soccer or whatever? So, it was that I was incredulous that she wasn't able to just go with her peers. So, I wanted to create that environment, and we did.

Similar to Rose, one of the focus group participants shared her poignant journey of infertility and how that has led her to redirect her dream of becoming a parent, to finding a higher purpose.

So, my vision was to redirect a lot of my energy that I had been sort of preparing for my dream of becoming a mother and sort of redirecting that into something else and pouring basically all of that into finding a purpose in life.

Furthermore, her shift in personal vision led her to seek to develop a methodology to improve mental health for the BIPOC community and refugee community. “I want to develop a research methodology to improve mental health provisions in care for BIPOC folks and for the refugee community.”

Kristina, on the other hand, was drawn to animal rights issues and chose Columbia Law School because they had an animal law course, which led her to create a Student Animal Legal Defense Fund Chapter.

And then when I made the decision to go to law school, I was thinking that I would take animal law courses and get involved in that way and try to use my law degree to help animals in some way. So, I chose Law School Columbia because they had just received a grant to create an animal law course. And so that was exciting to me. So, it's one of the

reasons I chose that law school, and then I created the Student Animal Legal Defense Fund Chapter.

### **Guided by Their Faith**

Two participants (8%) mentioned faith as having guided them to act on their vision.

Edina explains how as a daughter of Christian ministers, she started receiving her own directions from God, strengthening her spirituality.

My parents were also Christian ministers and so I think to a certain extent, my faith as a child also was of my decision and my choices. I also started receiving my own direction, I would say, from God, and spirituality is something that's actually quite important to me. And so, I would get just direction here and there on what my life was intended to be doing, right?

Sharon echoes Edina's statements of having a potent experience with and being guided by God.

It was a process that began with recognizing sort of this itch that I couldn't quite figure out how to scratch, paying attention to what was happening in my life. And some of what was happening was pointing me back to my faith roots and just getting present with that and participating in my faith and sort of working that out. For real, not just talking about it, but living it changed everything for me. And then for me, I had some really potent experiences with God, just hearing things that, not audibly, but ideas that I knew weren't my own. And one day there was something that dropped in and it was, I meant to help people find purpose and get into jobs with meaning.

### **Experiencing a Transformative Event**

While an overwhelming number of participants were found to be intrinsically motivated, 18 out of 24 participants (75%) mentioned experiencing a transformative event that triggered their decision to act on their personal vision.

Edina vividly recalls a poignant moment when she came upon a passage in a book she was reading over one weekend that resonated with her so strongly that she resigned that following week.

In September of 2013, when I was reading a book called *Let Your Life Speak*. And it's a book by Parker Palmer and the theory or the thesis, I suppose, of it was that your life has always been speaking to you. Someone recommended the book to me and I started



reading it on the Friday. And there was a line in one of the poems that said, "Ask me whether what I've done is my life." And at that point, I'd been practicing law for 13 years, 10 of which I'd worked with the same senior partner. And the line just kept resonating within me, asking me whether what I've done is my life. And on Monday I went into my senior partner's office and I handed him my resignation letter.

Salome, akin to Edina, describes a spiritual and transformative moment where completing a visioning exercise triggered her motivation to act on her vision.

We did this visioning exercise of values and things that are important for us in our career and in our lives and I came to realize during that very intense moment, it was almost like a spiritual moment, that there were so many words that started with a W. In German and in English like world and worthiness, and things like that. I almost instantly compared that to my current job situation, and I saw not much of this is fulfilled there. I think that was, for me, when I think back, the first step to my vision.

Sharon also shares her transformative episode. She explains that she had contacted a spiritual mentor to process some thoughts and was put in touch with a Ministry, where during a session, a scribe captured her thoughts in a plaque that became her compass.

I remember this and that date was January 20th, 2013. Yeah. So, this is what happened. I had those thoughts. When I woke up, I called a spiritual and professional mentor of mine, told her what happened. I said . . . I just told her and then she said, "I can't believe I haven't told you this before, but there's somebody I know. There's a ministry in Dallas that does what you're talking about. In that session, there was an incredible scribe who was doing visual notes and he gave each of us a plaque, a drawing of the thing that was most striking about what we were talking through. And what he said to me was the way you're talking about helping people find purpose is so different. And my plaque says *the power of understanding and telling your story*. So that was sort of a poignant moment for me and I just got curious about what that meant.

Chloe, in explaining her transformative event, was astounded at the lack of women's professional advancement and after attending a women's event, decided to open a collaborative space for women to develop, network and connect.

When I picked my head up, I was astounded at the numbers and the lack of progress, and the fact that we were still talking about things that my mom was talking about in the 60s.

And I came home from a women's event that, it was both a good one and a bad one for lots of reasons, and I wrote a business plan. And two weeks later, literally, I was like, this is my vision. I don't know why me, but I know that I'm the right person to lead something like this and have real impact. And that was it. Literally, that was it.

And then Lumiere was literally born, we opened our physical doors nine months later.

Among some of the other comments, Penelope recalls attending an event in Bali that she regards as a turning point.

I went to Green School in Bali about three years ago, yeah, three years ago, and that was definitely a turning point, when it became crystal clear to me, like, wow, I need to do something with the younger generation to help them think differently from a very young age, in order for them to create more impact later on.

Likewise, Dahab shares the poignant reason for her motivation. “The main trigger was actually working on the migrant and refugee crisis in 2015, 2016.” See Appendix W for a complete description among participants with respect to experiencing a transformative event.

### **To Prepare for Other Career Opportunities**

13 out of 24 participants (54%) viewed the impetus for change as linked closely to a desire to plan for other career opportunities, often guided by the need to leave an environment they no longer felt connected to professionally.

Sydney describes her former work environment as a place where “showing emotion was weak, mostly male-dominated. So, you were always not yourself. You were always cautious. You always had to project not being vulnerable. Always had to project, you know better than anybody, always controlling to an extreme, monocratic.” She adds, “It had more to do with the clarity of, ‘I don't belong here anymore.’”

Aamori, a woman of color, observed that her organization was very white and male-dominated, leaving her pondering about where she belonged.

It was a very, very white organization. And it's Global and Tools, it's so male-dominated. So that's another thing. So, I was like, "What am I doing here?" But I was good at selling. So, I think that kept me there a little bit longer because people were just saying like, "Oh, you can move up or you can do this here." But it wasn't in my heart.

Yumi, a first-generation immigrant experienced feeling discriminated against while operating in a white male environment.

I identify myself as female and of foreign national. I'm a first-generation immigrant. And my previous field was higher education, which was predominately managed or lead by a Caucasian male. When I say series of events, just looking at the ranking system in education, so from assistant professor to associate professor then being a full professor, tenure positions, non-tenure track, all this, the more I advanced, less allies I had. And in many occasions, I felt that I was discriminated.

Other women took advantage of opportunities that presented themselves. Kristina, an animal rights advocate, had the opportunity to explore a new job lead at an animal non-profit.

So, someone I know who worked at an animal protection organization reached out to me and said, "Hey, we have an opening, would you be interested?" And it was the right moment. And I thought maybe now is the time to really make that jump. So, I applied and left. So, I went to work for an animal non-profit.

Similarly, Belinda, who was working for an organization at the time, was asked by her client whether she would consider working for them. In reflecting on the conversation, she shares, "I do remember on the positive side a client of mine directly asked me, would I ever just work for them directly? So that sort of planted a seed that maybe I could."

### **Encouraged to Act on Their Vision**

4 out of 24 participants (17%) mentioned being encouraged by others to act on their vision. Three of the participants mention being encouraged by men. Chloe recalls a moment when a white man rallies her to take a risk. "He was that catalyst; it was a white man. It wasn't my girlfriends; it wasn't someone sort of my cheerleader or my network. It was a mentor, it was a white man saying, "Take a massive risk on yourself, Chloe." Likewise, Linda, in explaining who encouraged her to act on her vision states: "It's interesting, because they were all male figures, the superintendent, the principal, the next superintendent were all males."

Ekatarina also points out that her husband encouraged her to act on her vision.

And my husband then he asks me, "And now what? You've finished [your degree]. You did it. Why you did it? What's now? Where are you going to use it? What do you want now, with all of this? With two years of you not sleeping and not eating for achieving this, so, you achieved. What are you going to do with it?" [I said] what I really want to

do, like really, really, now is not to go for another job in my career but to actually start business on myself. And then he told it, “But okay. Do it.”

### **A Desire for Financial Independence**

3 out of 24 participants (13%) mentioned financial independence as a motivator for acting on their vision. Reka shares that she previously used to prioritize serving people over making an income, but now wishes to focus on increasing income.

The second is around not being unapologetic about making money. So before, I used to prioritize serving people above making money. And now I see that if you don't make money, you can't really, there's only so far you can go in terms of impacting people's lives. So, I want to do things that maximize income.

Aamori feels it is important to model financial independence to her children, especially as a woman.

The primary reason is being a financially independent woman and showing that for my kids. Been able to take care of my kids. Because I feel like you have, not I feel like because women you have more choices in life if you are dependent on a relationship financially. So that's where I want to be instead.

Additionally, Mandy shares that she wanted to remain financially independent after seeing how her parents struggled. “I also was just very driven, I think, to be not struggling financially because I watched my parents struggle.”

## **Finding #2**

**An overwhelming majority of the participants revealed that their primary challenge to transitioning to their desired reality was linked to personal issues**

Participants were invited to reflect on their journey in creating their personal vision, to describe challenges that they encountered along the way, and to share any concerns or reservations. The primary finding from this study indicates that while women had to overcome both internal and external challenges, most women, as the data shows, had to deal primarily with internal challenges, namely personal/emotional challenges. See Appendix O for a complete list of the types of challenges experienced by the women. Furthermore, Table 3 provides a summary of Finding #2 data.

**Table 3**

***Outline of Finding #2:***

**Finding #2**

A strong majority of participants (83%) revealed that their primary challenge to transitioning to their desired reality was linked to personal/emotional issues

**Participants reported the following internal challenges:**

- Personal/Emotional Issues (20 of 24, 83%)
  - Loneliness
  - Loss of Identity/Connections
  - Feeling Insecure
  - Mental Health
- Lacking a Plan of Execution/Implementation of the Vision (17 of 24, 71%)
- Fear of the Unknown (11 of 24, 46%)
- Identifying Transferable Skills/Building Knowledge (8 of 24, 33%)
- Balancing Family Life and Values (5 of 10, 21%)

**Participants reported the following external challenges:**

- Lack of Support from Others (10 of 24, 42%)
- Lack of Resources (8 of 24, 13%)
- Experiencing Discrimination (3 of 24, 13%)
- Adapting to a New Work Environment (2 of 24, 8%)

## **Personal/Emotional Issues**

The women who embarked on pursuing their personal vision faced a series of challenges, primarily personal ones that they had to confront during the transition process.

### ***Loneliness***

Several women cited loneliness as a challenge in transitioning to their desired reality. Sydney shares that “it would have been great to do [transition to my desired reality] with others. It felt so lonely. And most people don't even know what you're talking about.” Yumi concurs with Sydney about the difficulties of feeling alone. “For a long time, I felt like an island. Just super alone.”

Belinda explains that after the euphoria of her newfound freedom, she found herself feeling lonely and doubting her decision.

There was the challenge of loneliness. In the beginning, you hit this exciting freedom, I can go to the cafe, I can do whatever I want and then after a while, you're just realizing, it's just me in my room and just me again, me again. So, I did hit a moment in that first year where I thought maybe I made a mistake, this is too lonely.

Similarly, Rose reflects on the difficulty of being alone all day after being used to having a work family. “So, you always have your work family, and that's so fun to go to, and then all of a sudden, you're by yourself all day, so that was hard to get used to it.”

Agatha equates loneliness to a lack of belonging, noting that in her pursuit, she lost her community of professionals, which was demotivating and challenging.

Another challenge was the community, lack of . . . I'm definitely an affiliated type person. I'm affiliative, I need to belong, I need to stay in contact or to feel that I'm part of a community. My colleagues were my community. And from one day to the other, they disappeared. So, I had to rebuild my community, a community of coaches, a community of friends, professionals, a different type of community. And that was another challenge. Even if the business was doing great . . . I was demotivated, and I couldn't recognize why because I was doing what I liked. I said wow, why am I not happy? Because I was missing this sense of belonging.

### *Loss of Identity/Connections*

For some women, a challenge that presented itself was shedding a part of their identity.

The following quote from Magdalena illustrates how daunting it was for her to leave her organization and how that impacted her identity.

It's very scary. You basically strip yourself out of everything that you had accomplished, like leaving that organization. I had a title, I became someone, I started very young there as an intern, and then I left as a head of a team. So, I had a full identity fleshed out, and then suddenly I was putting everything away.

Sydney was drawn to share her impressions as she experienced leaving behind the world of work she knew so well.

I'm stepping out of this consciously, which has been my identity for so long and I don't know what the next one is going to be and maybe I'm just going to not know what to do. And then what? So that fear of consciously leaving all that behind.

Sharon similarly describes how she left the office to walk on the beach, realizing that her new identity was an obstacle.

So, I left my office, I was in my work clothes, I go to the beach and there are people outside, walking their dogs and throwing frisbees and I was, "Wow," and that perspective opened something for me that day. So yeah. Identity obstacle [was] huge. [I] worry, how will I maintain my lifestyle? What if my lifestyle changes? What does that mean for my friendships, enjoyment, and all of the things that I thought were so important?

Agatha discusses the change she had to undergo, the shift in her identity, and how she had to accept a different aspect of herself and reintegrate into society with a new identity.

The main one was to change, to shift my identity. And also, to accept that there was a different Agatha, with [a] different type of identity, professional and impersonal. Everything was well-established before, it was not anymore. And I had to re-introduce myself in a society with different clothes and [a] different title, which was not existing and now it was completely new. And [to] reintroduce myself, reshape my network, reshape my also home office type of environment, redesign my budget needs, everything. Now, I was rebirthing in a way. And that was the first challenge.



Other women mention different personal issues that proved challenging in making their transition. Agatha shares how asking for help after having had a very independent career was difficult for her.

Asking for help after 40 years of a very independent career and very independent way of living. I had to, for example, ask my husband okay, if anything goes wrong, will you help me? Which is not for me at least, there're people that doesn't care. But for me, it was difficult to say.

Whilst Magdalena shares the importance of belonging. "The other challenge was for me, I need to belong, and there was not that. But I really needed to belong. I really, really need to belong.

Others, like Linda, felt that leaving cohesive relationships was particularly challenging.

Well, I think the first challenge that I encountered was letting go. I had built a very, very cohesive relationship with the building that I was in. I had really worked hard over those eight years building relationships. Leaving those relationships was the most challenging part.

Nora felt much the same and outlines that having a relational orientation within the organization made her feel that she was letting people down.

I think one of them is very typically female, in that there was this real relational orientation that I had to the organization and so many people, that I felt like, that I was letting down. That I do think that. I mean maybe there was like a self-aggrandizing piece. I knew what I was talking about, and I was leaving this gaping hole for all these people.

### ***Feeling Insecure***

A few women also highlighted how insecurity plagued them during the process. Arlette mentions the moment when she became insecure about her personality.

There was a moment I realized that I was terribly insecure about my personality, first and foremost because I was interacting with people where I had used to have a level of . . . I wouldn't say respect, but I would say, in the sort of espionage, I had the security clearance to have this conversation. Where, when you don't have that yet, you're a little like, "Oh, hey how's it going?"

Dahab labels her challenge as the imposter syndrome.

I mean, tremendous, tremendous, tremendous, tremendous fear and imposter syndrome. I really was very convinced that I will fail, that nobody would want to hire me. Nobody, people will know that I don't know anything that I'm just BSing my way around.

A focus group participant also names having impostor syndrome as a challenge to her feelings of confidence.

I think I could have probably gotten there quicker and with less bruises, if I had more time dedicated to actually knowing what the F I'm doing. And I think for me also just mindset plays into everything, right? It's like the contradictions in our life. I'm successful and driven, but I'm also scared to death and there's fear there, it's like the oppositions that exist in the imposter syndrome and stuff that creeps up that you're shh! So yeah, I think it's working through that too and not judging and questioning.

Saanvi shares how much she relied on external validation to help her through her transition.

It's like I needed people to say how wonderful and exceptional it was for me to dare to do it. I've always been told; I see you doing your own thing. External people validating that I am worthy, that I can do it, that I should do it, but me never daring to take that step and be like, "I'm going for it."

Aamori specifically mentions mindset as being a big challenge in regard to venturing out into something new.

The biggest is mindset. And it's still a challenge. It is really venturing out onto something that you've never done before. And again, it's that knowing you know how to do a job, but not knowing the things you need to do to get there. It's that scary. So, it's challenging to, every day be in that headspace but also be confident enough to say, "That's okay. This is where I'm at. It doesn't mean I don't have to know everything right now." So, it's like constantly talking to yourself or talking to other people to help you get there. That was definitely the biggest challenge initially.

Ekatarina describes her insecurities around her fear of failure and concern about people not seeing value in her idea.

Then it's fear of failure. What happens if I don't succeed? Then fear that people think . . . Like now, I've got to go out and sell this idea. What if people think it's stupid or no one wants it, or they don't understand the value, or they feel that the value isn't really what they need right now?

Akira recalls feeling challenged by the questions she had of herself.

Yeah, sorry. So, when I initially made the transition, the biggest challenge was questioning . . . So, it's actually a different challenge then. It was not knowing if what you're doing is right. And it's weird because you're doing this because you believe in it, but we're all human. And so, I question everything that I do.

A few participants mentioned impatience as a hurdle. Aamori comments: “Well, just because of my personality, and I had mentioned before when I know I finally want something it's like, you can't get there fast enough,” whilst Sydney remarks: “My impatience. Why don't I know already what this looks like?”

### ***Mental Health***

Magdalena mentions depression as a challenge to her pursuing her personal vision and reaching out for help.

I think the first big challenge I remember is when I was in Nantes. Even if I was training and everything, I was very depressed, so I also had therapy. I was miserable. I hated France, I hated Nantes, I hated the negativity. So, I think that the first challenge again was look for help.

Chloe, who founded a women's co-working space, speaks of the mental strain of building up her business.

I think I really underestimated the mental stress and strain of running and building your own company. But when you're doing it for another organization and you're a part of that, you have a safety net. Even if you mess up, you likely still have a safety net. The rollercoaster of being an entrepreneur or small business owner, whatever you want to identify as, is nothing like I could have ever imagined. Because it's not like for a couple days you're on a high, and then you go to . . . It's multiple times a day, you're up and down.

### **Lacking a Plan of Execution/Implementation of the Vision**

Many of the women discussed the challenges they faced with implementing their vision and getting their business off the ground.

Magdalena's comment was representative of other women's experiences with pursuing a vision, yet not having formulated a plan of action. She points out,

I knew I wanted to help people, but I never formed like, "Okay, I want to create my company," or, "I want to work in this." It was such a new world for me. I had the outcome or the impact. I knew the impact I wanted to have, I knew that I needed to be a coach to have that impact, but I didn't have the path in between. I didn't have the plan or how I was going to get there.

Edina explains her lack of having a clear plan. "I knew I had some dreams. I had some visions. I had things that I knew what parts of what I wanted to do but I did not have a plan."

Yumi found herself in a similar situation. "I felt that I had enough resources, but I didn't know how to transmit that in the most helpful way. Aamori also comments that despite being clear on her vision, she needed to know how to start.

I need[ed] help in how to move forward. I see this thing in the end, or not necessarily even the end it was just like, the first three years. I couldn't really think that far in advance because I just needed to know how to start.

Additional women shared their challenges in implementing their vision. Mandy, who left corporate to start a horse farm, shares that her biggest challenge was finding the right people for her team.

I think the biggest challenge is getting the right people on your team, I'll say on your team, whatever team it is. And also, the right people, it's not just the right people at the time, but it's also the right people that also are able to change.

Chloe, who founded a women's co-working space, explains how she had underestimated the strain of building and running an entrepreneurial business.

I think I really underestimated the mental stress and strain of running and building your own company. But when you're doing it for another organization and you're a part of that, you have a safety net. Even if you mess up, you likely still have a safety net. The rollercoaster of being an entrepreneur or small business owner, whatever you want to identify as, is nothing like I could have ever imagined. Because it's not like for a couple days you're on a high, and then you go to . . . It's multiple times a day, you're up and down.

Some women, like Penelope and Agatha, found that setting up a business routine was a challenge in itself. Penelope reflects on her having to be self-driven, organized, and accountable to her own projects.

Of course, nobody gives you KPIs. Nobody gives you milestones. Nobody gives you due dates. You all have to do it yourself. You got to be very self-organized, and self-driven, and responsible for yourself. It's your own accountability to your own projects. Honestly, I sometimes still struggle with that. There's so many things you can do, and you really have to prioritize. There's no boss you can ask, and then the boss can say, "Okay, out of these 10 things, focus on these three this year." You have to do it yourself.

Along the same vein, Agatha shares her struggle with time management and self-organization.

And then the management of my time, second challenge. And you don't have any more, the corporate world that drives you automatically from nine to five to eight, or whatever it is with your agenda set your assistant, etc. But you are the owner of your time, the owner of your agenda, the owner of everything. You are your own boss, so you cannot even complain and blame anyone if you work too much or too little, it's just you. The second challenge was this.

A focus group participant similarly shares her concerns with self-management and figuring out a business plan

I haven't had a lot of training in business plan, revenue . . . It doesn't come natural to me. I'm intrigued by it, but I just feel it's a struggle, right? Like where do I spend my time? I'm trying to be a mom, trying to make money, trying to figure out what's important to me in life, trying to figure out my budget, revenue stream, there's just so much.

### **Fear of the Unknown**

For a number of participants (11 of 24, 46%) fear of the unknown was found to be a factor they encountered, though they forged ahead despite their apprehensions. Sharon expresses that surrendering to her fear was a significant obstacle. "Most importantly, the biggest obstacle of all [was] the fear of surrendering what I know for something better. Because what if it's really not better?" Nora similarly shares her fear of moving towards something new. "I had never started my own business before. And that was really scary to me."

Sydney found that the vagueness of making the transition without a clear sense of where she was going, raised a lot of fear.

I think it's always really difficult and I was in the same situation. To make a transition like that without knowing where you're really going. So that vagueness, not really being

clear what is that going to look like then? As much as the coaching supported me in that, there was still a lot of fear. And in my case, it wasn't even financial.

Whilst the financial aspect did not play into Sydney's fears, other women spoke of the fear of financial insecurity as an obstacle. Saanvi, for example, shares that her challenge was in leaving a salaried position and the security it provided.

The biggest one is fear. Fear. Leaving a job that pays a salary. There's a structure. There's people around you. There's support. There's a salary at the end of the month. If you don't work for two days, your salary still gets paid. It's like this kind of security . . . The security aspect of the job was my fear. Fear was a big proponent in this.

Edina relatedly affirms the strain of financial insecurity. "The psychological impact of seeing money decrease every month with nothing coming in was very triggering. And so, I think that in itself would occasionally create this fear of the unknown."

One of the focus group participants concurs with Edina, sharing that her primary challenge is the financial fear of not being able to provide for her family and lifestyle.

But in terms of the other obstacles, it's the financial piece because I am somebody who grew up with depression-age parents who saved everything and were always a little bit risk-averse in terms of money. There was never enough money. And now that I've been a new mom and it's really that. And we're in the middle of a global pandemic and I have the fear of not being able to support me and my child and my horses basically.

Another focus group participant also speaks to her fear of suddenly being responsible for her children, and not just for herself.

And so, branching out into a territory that I'm basically trying to vision and create for myself is scary. And I think the sense of fear that I feel is deepened by two things, lack of sleep and exhaustion because it's very tiring having small children and the fact that I'm no longer responsible for just myself. I have a husband and two kids, so I feel like I have to take into account what is best for them from a security standpoint, financially and otherwise.

### **Identifying Transferable Skills/Building Knowledge**

33% of the women shared that identifying transferable skills and building knowledge was a challenge they faced in the transition process.

Charlotte recounts how she approached start-ups she was interested in working with.

It took me some time to be able to identify some skills and explain them and learn ways to also reassure my potential start-ups that could potentially be interested in my profile that I could actually do it. That I was not just a lawyer, basically.

Agatha felt much the same as she shares her concerns about her capabilities in an unfamiliar field.

Other concern[s] were yeah, connected for example, to my capability to sell, because it was the first time that I had to sell something. In the end, I was a marketing leader, but not the salesperson. And I was good in creating the products, and this was important parts in this transition. But then selling is a different job.

While Edina, a former partner in a law firm having since launched an NGO, shares that she had a limited understanding of the functioning of a non-profit.

I didn't know anything about NGO[s] or nonprofit[s]. I didn't understand basic definitions that when people would go to meetings or conferences and people would say things I'd be the person writing down all the notes because like, "What does that even mean?" What does it mean? What is capacity building?

Aamori also found herself reminiscing on having to build knowledge as she set out on her own.

It's like, I just know what I know and the things that I can do. The service I can provide, but I don't know this other stuff. So that kind of holds you back initially. And I didn't realize that. It's just a continuous journey of seeking all the things that you don't know because you always don't know stuff. And in the beginning, I just thought, "People know it, and then you do it." But really, you learn every day and you make mistakes every day. Whether you're one year in the business or 10 years into the business and you just keep it moving.

### **Balancing Family Life and Values**

A few women (21%) spoke of the role of family life and values as they considered making a transition. Salome points out the difficulties in having to tell her parents that she was leaving her job to pursue her personal vision.

It was definitely a hurdle to tell my parents. It was like, I'm leaving this super secure job, and yeah. It was definitely not a struggle, or not for a very long time, but it was a little bit of an "Oh, God. I've got to tell them."

Charlotte refers to the role her upbringing played in helping her make decisions.

I had a certain image of me. And it's not just an image of me, it's the way I was raised up, it's what had guided so many of my decisions for so many years, and the uncertainty. Yeah, I thought, "Okay, how am I going to make money?"

Dahab found that family judgment was a big concern for her and that she consequently did not tell her father she had quit her job.

My family judgments of me was definitely a concern. I mean, I'm in my mid-30s now, I'm still single, I don't have a solid routine, but to also . . . I actually did not tell my dad that I quit my job, and he never knew.

### **Lack of Support from Others**

A number of women reported external factors as challenges to pursuing their vision. For 42% of the participants, facing pressure from others and lacking support was the difficulty that was most frequently mentioned in their shared stories.

Mandy, who left banking to start a horse farm in Connecticut, shares that some individuals who she thought would support her, did not. "Some of the people that I would've considered mentors were very unsupportive when it came to actually executing what I considered my goal."

Edina reminisced about her friends' reaction to her sharing her vision, which prompted them to believe she was having a mid-life crisis.

I brought together some of my closest friends to create a vision circle where I shared with them the concept. And it was really, really fascinating because the response I got was pretty much similar to people who were just as shocked as the average person would have been and really trying to convince me of why this was such a bad idea. And whether or not I was having a midlife crisis.

Similarly, Linda shares how her colleagues were not supportive of her decision.

The biggest challenge that I faced was when I had colleagues that were not supportive of me. You can get all the love and compassion from your family, but they don't understand your job completely.



Dahab explains her frustration with having to justify her motivations and found people critical of her choices.

The other frustration is just the system by design, that people do not understand how you can be interested in so many different things and how you can actually just move from one thing. So, people will be like, "How come you worked for the UN and you took a sabbatical? You're all over the place." So, it's either you get all over the place or like, what the hell? To have to justify that is not always, actually, I feel it's exhausting, to be honest. So that was definitely a source of frustration.

Penelope shares her frustration with being peppered with questions from those who were suspicious about her motives.

How successful are you? How many clients do you have? How do you do this? Did you waste the day today? All these . . . a lot of external noise and, to be honest, also within our family. "Don't you just want to go back to corporate? It would be so much easier? Why do you go the hard way?" You know what I'm talking about? That's probably the worst.

Penelope sums up her sentiments by saying that she felt “mostly the pressure from outside.”

Claritta describes how she specifically steered clear of sharing her vision as she knew people would worry and attempt to talk her out of it.

I knew they'd worry and then [try] to talk me out of it, and you can't talk me out of it. And I'm like, I don't want six months of argument because I'm doing it. There's no one else's business, I'm doing it. What they'll do is bombard me with questions and I've got all these questions in my brain and I'm finding a solution, but until I can have the answer, I just don't have the energy to expend in telling them.

## **Lack of Resources**

33% of participants found themselves lacking human or financial resources, which proved challenging as they sought to implement their vision.

Ekatarina shares her frustration with having to do everything herself.

You are doing everything yourself. I got used to hav[ing] teams, and you say, you come to the office and this is your army. And here you come and there is no army. You're on your own. That was a frustration. Like, where is my army? Not having a team was a frustration

Rose also found herself having to navigate the lack of resources she was used to at work.

The hindrance again would be the lack of support, the lack of materials. Everything was accessible at work, I had the copier, and all the technology, so that part wasn't so easy. You had all these resources at your fingertips, and then now here you didn't. So, I guess that was hard.

Edina, on the other hand, found it difficult to create a team, especially since she was unable to pay them at the time.

I think creating a team at the outset was hard because it was important to me to find people who actually identified with the vision. And I had a hard time at the beginning finding people who were willing to move forward when I had no money to pay them, when I had nothing but a vision to share.

Aamori shared how finding her tribe as a resource was hard to do at the beginning of her business.

First year was tough navigating. I didn't have my tribe yet. I had to find my tribe. It wasn't until the second year that I realized this is important. And again, I'll use the same analogy as being a mom. It's like, you don't know which you don't know. You know? So, in being around those women and finding those women it takes time.

A few women mentioned financial matters as a stressor. Salome, for example, expresses her financial concerns. "Another thing was definitely of course financial concern. We were totally used to a double income for quite a long time."

### **Experiencing Discrimination**

13% of women mentioned experiencing some form of discrimination in transitioning to their desired reality. Magdalena was subject to age discrimination. When upon discussing her future career, her advisor stated that her age would work against her.

So, I went to him and I said, "Look, I want to do this, which school do you recommend? And would you hire me afterwards?" And he said, "No, you're too young. All my coaches have white hair. You're way too young. The fellows, they will never take you seriously."

Similarly, Edina faced discrimination from men who did not want to give up their power.

Trying to partner with the government to take women seriously. The pushback that I was getting [was] primarily from men within the system that were accustomed to holding on to power and control and not willing to relinquish any of it to anybody.

Rose, who opened an inclusive school for children, discovered that some parents, upon seeing children who looked different, pulled their children from her program.

We did encounter some parents that put their kids in, and then came to pick [them] up and saw that there were other kids, either [who] looked different, and then pulled them out. And so, that was concerning, and upsetting at the same time, and that was a big frustration. That's what led us to focus on the more education part of it.

### **Adapting to New Work Environments**

8% of participants shared that adapting to a new work environment was a challenge.

Edina, who set up a human rights non-profit, explains the difficulties of working with women who had been so broken.

Another thing I think that was challenging to me was trying to work within a space of . . . With women who had been accustomed to being so beaten down and having their spirits broken in so many ways that it was difficult in many ways to try to convince them of an alternative.

Arlette, who left New York City for Kentucky, found herself having to adapt to a different pace. “Not everybody is on New York time. And that faster pace [is] a different industry . . . you have to learn a different vernacular and also a different comportment in a way.”

### **Finding #3**

**The vast majority of participants (92%) learned to overcome their challenges through self-reflection, rather than through formal methods.**

The dominant findings that participants learned through self-reflection and in dialogue with others were reflected in the informal ways that women went about seeking help in pursuing their vision. Participants were asked to describe their challenges as well as techniques utilized to overcome the difficulties they encountered during their transition process. A vast number of women (22 of 24, 92%) talked of self-reflection and a strong majority of women (21 of 24, 88%)

shared that dialogue with others was how they overcame the obstacles they encountered in pursuit of their vision. See Appendix P for a list of the ways in which women learned to overcome their challenges. Additionally, Table 4 provides a summary of Finding #3 data.

**Table 4**

***Outline of Finding #3:***

**Finding #3**

The vast majority of participants (92%) learned to overcome their challenges through self-reflection rather than through formal methods.

**Participants reported the following informal ways in which they learned to overcome their challenges:**

- Through Self-Reflection (22 of 24, 92%)
- Through Networking and Dialogue with Others (21 of 24, 88%)
  - Dialogue with Experts
  - Networking
  - Dialogue with Peers, Friends, and Family
  - Trust as an Important Factor
- Learning from Experience (19 of 24, 79%)
- Through Mentoring and Role Models (8 of 24, 33%)

**Participants reported the following formal learning approaches:**

- Attending Training Courses and Hiring Coaches (16 of 24, 67%)

## Through Self-Reflection

Participants identified different instances that were instrumental in their learning. Yumi shares that she overcame her difficulties through persistence, which allowed for increased self-reflection.

I think a big part is persistence. Another part is communication. There were several challenges that I talked about. Things that I can control and things that I cannot control. So, I'm not going to talk about the things that I cannot control. But in terms of what I can control, like me second-guessing or self-doubting, it's also a frame of mind that I need[ed] to train myself and be persistent about.

Similarly, Dahab explains that her greatest realization was that she was quite resilient.

I think my [biggest] learning was I think, is the fact that I am quite resilient. And I think I, I mean, I'm not going to claim that I had a hard life, but there [were] hard moments, and hard moments do not necessarily stop me from doing what I feel is right. And I think, for me, just listening in and also accepting that whatever happens, I'm going to find my way, I think is really important.

Dahab also found that giving herself space for reflection was essential.

I think what I learned, in times of challenge, when I feel high anxiety, things are really hard to manage, [and] sometimes to just be like, "Okay." Instead of calling a hundred friends, I'm like, "Okay, you know what? Let me just actually pause, see, practice some gratitude, meditate on it, and just wait, practice that patience."

Agatha shares that she was more resourceful and entrepreneurial than she expected, and that this learning helped her transition to her desired reality.

The most important learning about myself is that, after having done this, I could do everything. If I should [undergo] another transition, this would worry me much less because after the first one, I think you can do pretty [much] everything. Now, if I should, if my family would need me to go and I don't know, open a restaurant or whatever. Okay, why not? I could do it. I could, I invent myself another time if it's based on a passion or the need. That's one of the most important learning [experiences], that I'm more resourceful than I thought, that I'm more entrepreneurial than I thought because I have never been an entrepreneur before.

Sharon, who describes herself as a visual thinker, found that she learned by spending her time in a visually-oriented space, sorting out her thoughts.

I'm a visual thinker and a creative contributor so I just spent a lot of time in visually-oriented things, just sort of sorting all of the thoughts that were running amok. I can't live without a whiteboard.

Reka reflects on the detrimental consequences of constantly putting other's needs before her own, which changed her perception of herself.

I didn't realize how much I was prioritizing other people's wants and needs over my own. So that was a real revelation. I didn't have a good understanding of how much negative feedback I was getting, and how that was shaping my perception of myself. And so that was a big a-ha, because it just changed who I talked to.

Additionally, Penelope observes that reflecting on her challenges was a positive learning opportunity for her.

The vision of creating the impact, maximizing the impact that I can make, with the time I have available, and the brain that I'm equipped with, and the privileges that I have, to really maximize my impact in the world. That's such a big driver, that overcoming challenges . . . you know, if something doesn't go well, if a conversation didn't go well, or I'm connected to someone and work out . . . maybe you're not interested in this. It's not a problem. I don't see it any more as a rejection. I more see it as a learning. I say, "Okay, cool, that's also feedback."

Nora reminisces on the three words that illustrate the learning she had to undergo. "I think the biggest thing I had to learn . . . Okay, I'm going to say three words that come to mind. So, I would say courage, compromise, boundaries." Nora also shares that she began to trust her intuition during her '50s. "In my inner '50s, [I learned] to listen more intently to my inner voice and my intuition because I have accumulated experience that gives me a good gut."

Kristina concurs with Nora, as she describes how she realized she was stronger than she imagined, particularly in making controversial decisions.

I learnt that I'm a lot stronger than I thought I was. In one of the roles, I made a really controversial decision. And I stand by it that it was the right decision. I don't know whether the folks who disagreed with me at the time have now come to realize it was the right decision, but it absolutely was, it was the right decision. But it was very unpopular. I got board approval for it and all of that.

Claritta expresses the same insight, realizing that she was stronger and far more self-sufficient than she imagined.

I'm braver than I thought I was. Because I always thought, oh, I can't, because I've got this big job. What am I going to do? And I've realized I'm actually incredibly independent and self-sufficient. Not just with work, but also with living in a different country where it's very much, so I don't have a man. Everyone else has a man. Yeah. I feel I can. Yeah, I've realized that we're all a lot stronger than we perhaps think we are.

Likewise, Linda shares that she began understanding the need to believe and trust in herself far more.

I think I needed to believe in myself more, have faith in myself, and trust myself. I can be very hard on myself, and I think I needed to start to stop looking for other people to tell me that what I was doing was right and believe in my decisions and trust in myself. I think it was a lot of social-emotional building that I really had to do. I think it was really about myself building up my character and who I was.

Dahab felt that in reconnecting with herself she was able to translate ideas into something that she embodied as a concept.

And so that where was like, the interim thing was like, I just need liberation from it. I just need to detach and break up and cover, and that's where just traveling, exploring something that doesn't involve my brain but involves my body, it was yoga, was very important as a way to start connecting a little bit more with who I am as a person, just translating also ideas into something that I embody as a concept.

Finally, Mandy shares her realization that anything she does not know, she can learn. “I think I learned that pretty much what I don't know, I can learn. I can ask someone, I can find it out, I can research it.”

### **Through Networking and Dialogue with Others**

Networking and dialoguing with others were commonly reported informal learning strategies. 21 out of 24 participants (88%) described using this strategy. Most of the women reached out to people they either knew or were looking to get acquainted with, in pursuit of their vision.



### *Dialogue with Experts*

Claritta, who was seeking to relocate to Argentina, learned how to overcome her hurdles by speaking with experts in areas where she lacked expertise.

I did a lot of research online, but then like I said, talking to experts in the areas that aren't my area of expertise. So, finance, tax, setting up a company, I had no idea of what type of company? What [does] it mean? What do you have to do from [an] administration perspective?

Arlette took the same approach and contacted two renowned experts in the field of conflict resolution who shared great advice.

When I was looking at this writing thing, getting in touch with people because I'm not shy about that. I talked to a Harvard professor, cold-called him. He's huge in the field of conflict resolution and diplomacy, William Ury.

Arlette continued that in speaking with experts, she received really good advice.

I got really good advice, I spoke to a couple of people that do conflict and things that affect peace-making, there's terminology in the Northeast. There's a woman who's been doing it for 30 years who's absolutely amazing who, again, gave me her time because I asked for it.

Edina comments that she reached out to people who were in the field she was interested in pursuing.

I started reaching out to some of the people that I knew who were where I was aspiring to go and started connecting with them and asking questions and conducting research in finding out what on earth the difference was between an NGO and a nonprofit.

Similarly, Ekatarina, who was pivoting from corporate to the investment arena, spoke to investors to learn the ropes of the business.

I never worked in investment. To be honest, I was scared of finance the majority of my life. And then I found a few people who were in investment, and I challenged myself. I spent with them so much time. They coached me on finance, and also on what they do and how it works, and what exactly is that? I kind of tried out different paths on myself and management buy-ins and management buy-outs. I tried to learn more about it. That's how I figure out the business model that I want to do, that I want to try to myself.

Mandy, who left banking to open a horse farm, shares how she leveraged a professional in her network. “I sort of learned by leveraging the professional that was also my trainer in that barn.”

Charlotte, along the same lines, targeted people whom she deemed knowledgeable in their field. “[I talked] with people who know what they are doing.” Aamori found that speaking with her business coaches led her to other resources. “My business coaches for sure, they led me to other resources, whether it's marketing help or finance help, or you should read this book or this podcast.”

A few participants mentioned relying on their larger network of experts. Salome speaks of using her coaching network as a way to learn. “. . . definitely the ICF, the International Coaching Federation. Definitely other coaches, connecting with them. Talking these things out through questions and everything that we had.” She describes leveraging their expertise in the coaching circle she attended.

I had a couple of friends, basically from the training . . . it's called Circling Coaching . . . so, we would, after the coach training, then meet in a couple of weeks, to then talk about and help to coach each other before we would go to real clients. Those actually became really close friends and we helped each other a lot.

### ***Networking***

Many of the participants used the connections within their community to network. Chloe shares how she spoke to everyone in her network to review her business plan.

I talked to everyone in my network. I went out to every banker woman and man I knew that were trusted advisors and said, "What do you think?" I had, I don't know, a dozen people that I trusted read my business plan and give me feedback. What was missing? What did I need? What did they think?

Charlotte shared how she started networking to identify the start-up companies she was looking to join.

I started networking. I spent some time looking for potential companies, plus potential start-ups that I could join, activating my network to be put in touch with the right people or to learn about some companies I hadn't thought about. That was like a full part-time job, and I spend many hours doing that every week. After a couple of months, I realized that I was starting to identify potential companies that could be interested in continuing the conversation.

Claritta approached networking by contacting people who came through her contacts.

And then again, the people I spoke to came through contacts I had. So, living in Switzerland, of course, you know a lot of people in finance, you know lots of people who are from different countries, so, or lots of people who've moved around a lot. So, they have contacts and maybe that contact has a different contact. So those for me, it was my network, I think.

### ***Dialogue with Peers, Friends, and Family***

Several participants described leveraging their peers, friends, and family. Agatha emphasizes how she leveraged her community of university classmates.

I'm a very curious person. So, I keep studying and learning, now with this virtual setting. I think is even more accessible. For me, it's always a community of people. My community of university mates. I learn a lot through people, more than through books or documents.

Similarly, Yumi also shares how she leveraged her network of friends.

Friends. Oh, friends. Definitely friends. Definitely friends. So, I was like, "What do I do with a website?" And I had a very good friend who does that for a living, so I could turn to friends.

Saanvi mentions drawing on her network of friends and spending time interviewing them for their insights and thoughts.

I always go to friends who've been through this and I interview them. How did it make you feel? What did you do? What are you doing now? What about your feelings now? What are your thoughts now? What would you have done differently? What did you do well? What would you recommend? All that kind of stuff.

Dahab expresses her gratitude for the friends who make up her network and who trigger inspiration.

I definitely relied on friends, and I think I'm really blessed by the fact that I have friends that have very different paths. Sometimes you just go and just talk to people that are

doing different things. It triggers inspiration and sometimes the group of friends that would think you're completely out of your mind is there, but there's also friends that were like, "Yeah, of course, go and do it."

Participants also shared how they relied on their immediate family circle. Charlotte, in discussing her networking tactic, mentions how her husband's network and his knowledge were useful to her.

My number one was of course Andre. So of course, introductions and ideas as to where to look, which direction to look, and how to present myself and to frame my speech so that someone who is on the other end of the table who speaks his "startup language," I don't come across as arriving from another planet.

This sentiment was echoed by Akira, who speaks about learning from her family and friends.

I learned from the people around me. I learned from my family. I learned from my friends. I learned from seeing others that seemed to be at a pace or operating in a way that I strive to be. I learned by seeing others doing the things that I continue to strive to be or do or seeing others that have reached levels that I'm striving and continuing to strive to reach. Seeing those helped me learn that it is possible, resources are available.

Akira, in particular, reflects on the fact that as a daughter of a poor black family, she gained immense knowledge from her parents and credited them for giving her the ability to dream big.

I can't discount my parents. I come from a black American family. My parents were raised in the projects. They were very, very poor. And what they overcame, and the street knowledge, if you will . . . Learning as you go along, the information, and still being able to overcome . . . My mom has a master's degree and she worked for the city. My dad . . . he retired from government. Even though we have different lives, if you will, or different ambitions, it's because of them that I have the ability to even dream bigger. So they are a huge source of information with just how to handle, overcome, when you feel like all the odds are stacked up against you.

Magdalena sums up her network by enumerating those who helped her overcome her challenges: "My friends, my mentor, my husband, my coach, my therapist."

### ***Trust as an Important Factor***

A few women mentioned trust as an important factor in dialogue with others. Chloe shares that she created focus groups with trusted friends. “I did mini focus groups with some of my friend groups and networks that I trusted, and saying, "Would you join this? Would you participate?" Saanvi similarly mentions turning to trusted people for guidance.

I turned to trusted people. I turned to Arla who I know understands what I'm speaking about and I don't need to over-explain my idea. I just send her my stuff and she'll get it. I wrote to another girl that Arla and I had hired in our old team because she's a strong, critical thinker and she has a lot of strengths that are my weaknesses. She's just someone who's great to have on board. It was really people that I trust, that make me feel good and I know can help me push things in a certain direction.

Aamori recounts learning how to extend her trust to teammates. “. . . learning how to, I guess trust other people to be a part of your team. That's huge.”

### **Learning from Experience**

75% of participants mentioned learning from experience as an integral part of their journey. Belinda reflects on her years of professional experience and the wealth of information and tools she accumulated over the years that connected her to her current work.

Honestly, I think that the culmination of my experiences, everything from even like working in business, but all my agency, I have kept so much of a library of assets and catalog, ways like, oh, this kind of diagram, I've got that in a folder. So, I felt like I kind of, I had so much information and assets that I have had along the way, and of course experience. So, I think leveraging those was really helpful, just templates for certain things, I had a lot of that. Of course, our handy friend, Google, being able to Google, what corporation should I be in? What are the pros and cons of that?

Sydney equally shares the value of her former experience with piloting projects, which readied her for her professional reinvention.

I think that a lot of that was learned already in many ways. And it was in a way just another project. And in my case, I think it had a lot to do with that I came out of a profession that is taught design thinking as problem solving and the term design thinking has a lot to do with how to create something out of nothing. And that's also where a lot of piloting is done. So, I think that learning that I already had internalized is a big part of going through basically reinventing yourself.

Kristina describes the benefit of her past experiences and how it taught her to be less fearful in her professional space.

Now, I think the biggest help is the benefit of experience being through everything I've been through. I am so much more comfortable in my skin and voicing my opinions. I'm a lot less fearful than I used to be in saying something that I know is going to be unpopular, which doesn't mean that I don't get shaky when I say it. But I feel more comfortable doing it because I've regretted not being that way.

Edina shares a personal story of trauma that was instrumental in helping her understand and take on the work she chose as her desired reality.

And I think for the first time I really understood the power of trauma. Because I myself had gone through some traumatic experiences . . . As a teenager, I was a victim of being physically assaulted. I was almost raped on another occasion, but I didn't . . . I don't think I really, truly comprehended the importance of it until I started doing the work that I was doing.

Others relied on research as a way to gain additional knowledge. Ekatarina resorted to teaching herself some hard skills. "I had to learn again how to do PowerPoint and Excel because you need to do things yourself."

Likewise, Edina shares that reading was essential to accruing the necessary skills to pursue her personal vision. "I read a lot of books. I mean, I digested everything I could get my hands on."

Rose, along the same lines, discusses how research played a role in her learning. "So, we did a lot of research, we researched area programs, and just try to figure out what our challenges might look like? Who would be supporters of ours?"

Saanvi similarly explains that research was instrumental in her learning journey.

I did a lot of research. The way for me to create is first to do a lot of reading and research. I like to go really big and messy and then start making things small, digestible, up to having a super detailed structured toolkit, inspiration of the day, stuff like this.

Agatha found herself learning online and within communities of experts. "I keep studying and learning also online, also in other expert communities." Aamori also describes how research

played a role in her learning, as well as her realization that she needed to learn from a coach and a mentor.

I read books. I looked online for someone who was doing what I wanted to do but was successful at it. And I needed to learn from a coach. And I found my first mentor that way.

### **Through Mentoring and Role Models**

33% of the women mentioned mentors as important role models in their professional pursuits. Some of the participants cited the instrumental role women played in their professional journeys. Nora recalls how her female mentor helped increase her interest in women's career development. "I had an amazing woman mentor to really start piquing my interest around women's career development and how that had been a really under-looked field."

Similarly, Edina spent time with women whom she considered mentors. "I took a lot of time, like I said, to really sit down with some women who were well-known in the Nigerian NGO space. So, they really became mentors for me in many ways."

Some of the women also mentioned male mentors. Edina in particular, describes a man who she viewed as one of her mentors. "And there was a man who also was a mentor for me that had worked in the area of sexual violence against women but on the men side."

Chloe, like Edina, shares that her male mentor encouraged her to take a bet on herself.

As that mentor of mine that I told you about in the beginning said to me, "The biggest bet you can take on, and the best bet is yourself." And so, you know you're going to succeed, and you'll figure it out. And it's okay if you don't know it all right now. Lean on your network, lean on your advisors, and just keep swimming. Don't tread. Keep swimming.

Linda also references the role of her male superintendent who asked to mentor her to become an administrator. "A superintendent that came to me about three times and kept saying, 'I would like to mentor you to become an administrator.'" Magdalena recounts how she had

reached out to a male mentor to ask for advice. “I went back to one of my mentors from university. I said, ‘Look, I want to do this, which school do you recommend?’”

Mandy, in reflecting on her role models, summed it up by saying, “I had a lot of good role models.”

### **Attending Training Courses and Hiring Coaches**

67% of the women reported relying on formal learning strategies as a means to pursue their vision. Magdalena shares that she was an avid fan of formal training: “Formal trainings, I’m a junkie for that.”

Two participants mentioned attending women’s leadership classes. Charlotte, for example, describes an incredible leadership development program she enrolled in while working at Campbell’s.

I was a senior tax manager at Campbell’s. I was in the partnership track and I had just completed this leadership development program. It was an amazing experience. I think that helped me build some confidence that I could do things that were not law-related.

A number of women hired the services of a coach, like Sydney, who sought a coach to help her think through ideas and structure her plan to implement her vision.

My actions then were much more about, take some time off and then develop a plan. And I had my coach by my side at the time. So, it was a very structured, weekly, monthly thing for me. And I needed to create a new structure. And my success was then tied to that structure, which I really needed, I think, at the time. And not just, we’ll see what comes up. [] And so, I had with my coach created some ideas about what would that vision look like. What are the elements? Where could that happen? What have you done so far that you could build on? So, where does your passion and talent intersect with your values?

Reka shares how she paid for her coaching services in pursuit of her goal. “It’s been a strategy of building a community with people who are doing what I’m doing, also being held accountable and getting some coaching, paying for services.”



Magdalena was drawn to coaching and signed up for training. “I decided to train as a coach, and I had an amazing coach that helped me in that transition.”

Salome also explored coaching and hired a coach to help her with her transition.

The other thing was the help of [a coach] . . . and it was just a very short coaching engagement that was really targeted towards the execution of quitting my job. Because I was afraid to go back out, so I hired a coach for it. Then there were just three intense sessions in which we really prepared very, very tactically I would say, for the conversations that I needed to have.

Several women spoke of general upskilling as a means to pursue their vision. Nora talked of investing in upskilling as she needed some expertise in a different professional area.

So, one action I would say would be kind of some upskilling. I knew I had some expertise, but I also felt that I had, kind of, I needed more in a different area. So, investing in more learning that was definitely one action.

Penelope also shares that she gained knowledge from online upskilling courses.

I think a lot of learning, like webinars and trainings, and it didn't just come, it wasn't a decision, and now I do this, and boom . . . it's been every year I do one or two trainings to upskill myself, and so that helps. Just reading lots. Informing myself. Being open-minded to lots of new input, and information, yeah.

Reka signed up for a course on mindset to learn a different way of being.

I enrolled myself in classes, because I realized that I needed to learn a different way of being so that I could get a different result. So, there was one course that was around mindset, that was really helpful to me, because I didn't know that I need associations around wealth and being wrong, or being wicked, the wealthy and the wicked, that sort of thing.

#### **Finding #4**

**All participants (100%) in this study identified having a supportive community/a supportive family as a significant helping factor in transitioning to their desired reality.**

This section outlines the factors participants described as having helped or hindered them in fulfilling their personal vision. In order to understand the factors that enabled and/or inhibited participants in transitioning to their desired reality, the researcher asked questions related to their experience along their journey.

See Appendix Q for a complete list of factors that helped or hindered participants in fulfilling their vision. Additionally, Table 5 provides a summary of Finding #4 data.

**Table 5**

***Outline of Finding #4:***

**Finding #4**

All participants (100%) in this study identified having a supportive community/a supportive family as a significant helping factor in transitioning to their desired reality.

**Participants reported the following factors that helped them fulfill their vision:**

- A Supportive Community/A Supportive Family (24 of 24, 100%)
- Prior Work Experience (17 of 24, 71%)
- Having an Execution Strategy (15 of 24, 63%)
- Belief in Oneself (8 of 24, 33%)
- Self-Care Practices (5 of 24, 21%)
- Financial Security (5 of 24, 21%)
- Spiritual Faith (3 of 24, 13%)

**Participants reported the following factors that hindered them in fulfilling their vision:**

- Self-Doubt (11 of 24, 46%)
- Unsupportive/Unpleasant Work Environment (8 of 24, 33%)
- Financial Strain (7 of 24, 29%)
- Overwhelming Work/Personal Demands (5 of 24, 21%)
- Leaving Established Work Relationships (5 of 24, 21%)

## **A Supportive Community/A Supportive Family**

All women identified a supportive community and/or a supportive family as the primary enabling factor in the transition to their desired reality. Ekatarina references her circle of friends and family as her safety network who advised and supported her along the way.

I think for me I'm just lucky because I have great people around me. That's all that helps. Both family-wise and from my circles and friends. These networks, these safety networks, that's the thing that helps a lot to overcome all the challenges and to find the solutions, because they are both advising what you can do, helping actively with contacts or with anything that can be useful. But also, emotionally, because sometimes you're just emotionally drained.

Akira concurs with Ekatarina as she shares the story of the support she receives from her family.

I come from a black American family . . . they are a huge source of information with just how to handle, overcome when you feel like all the odds are stacked up against you. So, I talk to my mom and my dad . . . More so my dad . . . But so much. So much. And they just have this insight. It's almost like when you talk to the elder in the community.

Agatha similarly describes how her family and network of friends have been of crucial help.

For sure my family has been crucial because leaving the corporate world, a safe space guaranteed, with a certain position money and so on, and given my need of independence, I didn't want to rely on others. And so, I had to take this conversation, have this conversation with my partner, with my family. You see, my family was really super important because it was a safe space where I could share my thoughts and to also, listen to someone that told me okay, no worries, whatever happens we are here. Then my network of friends, colleagues, people I could also use as a test now for testing my environment or for my idea. And then I would say these two communities.

Agatha also shares that asking for help from her network of family and friends was one of her strengths.

But I've always been there for people, friends, my network, sparring partners. I have always been good enough in asking for help. This is one of my strengths. So, every time I had an issue along the way, I thought who is the best person in my network, in my friends, in my family that could help me. And I immediately asked for help. [It] is always about people and relationships.

Likewise, Dahab highlights how she leveraged her network by asking her friends for advice.

In terms of support, I mean I had really good friends that I can just talk to about stuff, but sometimes I also am not . . . I think I'm a person that just also, I don't shy away from asking for advice. So, if I see somebody who I'm inspired by, who I just connect with, I'm always like, "Hey, look, what do you think? Or how did you do this?"

A few women in particular, referenced their spouses as being key in supporting their journey. Arlette speaks of her husband's supportiveness of her vision.

Thank God my husband was supportive of this too because had I not had that. I did not have enough savings to really launch into this on my own. I would've been able to do it, but I would've had to have a fulltime job in order to support myself, therefore I would've had to have something that I did for the sake of doing it in order to do something else.

Kristina, similarly, mentions leaning on her husband for support. "I leaned on Raymond, my husband, emotionally for support. But really other than that, I didn't ask for any help or support."

Belinda discusses the importance of having a strong team and how helpful it was to have a sister as a business partner. "Having an awesome team helps so much. I mean, to be surrounded by talented people who care so much about what they're doing, and to have a business partner like my sister. That helps so much."

Reka shares how joining a community of writers propelled her creativity because she became accountable to others. "I joined a community of writers and that really catapulted me because . . . you are accountable to a group of people, you have to write and perform."

Saanvi also recalls how having a community was helpful to her. "What helps me is a community, support people, knowing that I can test my ideas, knowing that people before me have gone through this themselves."

Rose, who was putting together a business plan for a school she was setting up with her husband, references the role of the supportive community they encountered. "So, we just started

putting a plan together, [a] business plan. We started reaching out to the community, everyone was so supportive, so we got lots of input from them.”

Some participants specifically mentioned women’s networks as having been incredibly impactful in their journey. Aamori shares how becoming part of a women’s network lifted and supported her during this period.

It really had to do with the people I started surrounding myself with. That help, not only lifts you up when your mindset might be a little shaky or like, "Can I do this?" I can't believe there was that period this summer I was like, "Do I need to quit?" And then I look back now and I'm like, "What was I thinking?" But the reason why I didn't was because even though my mindset was shaky, it was because I had women around me that were just so supporting, lifting you up. And you really, really need that.

An additional reflection that was shared in thinking about enabling factors was the role of a shared vision. Belinda speaks of the benefits of having a partner who shared her vision and how hiring her sister was a turning point for the company.

The other critical juncture is finding a partner. It's one thing to do this and another thing to do this alone, but when you have a partner who shares your vision and can on the days that it's tough, is there strong or just that, and just I think the momentum of that. So, for years I was trying to recruit my sister to join me. She and I have very complimentary skill sets, so huge juncture and turning point for the company and to realize this vision of Agility Strategies, was her joining.

Nora, in thinking about how she started her business, also shared how having a vision with her business partner helped her honor her vision.

So, I would say one of the first things I did was spend a lot of time talking with Jake about what this really would mean and kind of align on what we felt was a vision that honored both of us. Though I would say it was my vision, but it was also our vision.

### **Prior Work Experience**

A large number of women in the study (67%) described their prior work experience as enabling them to fulfill their vision. Claritta recalls that she would not be in her current role were it not for her prior work experience in the pharmaceutical industry, which was complex,

painful, transformational, and an environment that gave her confidence and an extensive network.

I wouldn't be in my position without my previous environment, without PharmaGlobal. So, it helped in so many ways. It was painful. It's a great company to be fair and I was well paid, and I learned a lot. It helped because like I said, it was the most complex environment I've ever worked in. And I have worked in a lot of very difficult environments. So that helped me because it gave me the confidence. And well I achieved though, was that frankly, even now I look back and I think, I can't believe what me and my little team of two people achieved in such a short amount of time. And it was transformational. And I'm really proud of that. So that gave me that confidence. So, it's been my frankly, the contacts I've made there have been the vast, almost all of my business. It gave me the grounding. It gave me the experience to do what I now do for the companies. So, I've got the experience as well as dealing with the politics.

Chloe, a former banker, saw her prior experience as foundational in giving her management, leadership experience, as well as an understanding of business and strategic planning.

There's no way I could have built this company or done what I've done without all of those years of experience. So, I had great foundational knowledge of management [and] leadership. I had been managing people for the last 15 years of my career, if not more, different cultures, different skillsets. But at the same time, I understood how to write a business plan, and run a strategy, and execute on a business plan or a strategic plan. Execution is critical.

Edina, a former partner in a law firm, also spoke of the confidence-building she gained from her 13 years of practicing law.

When I think back as to what helps me, I think certainly having 13 years of building confidence with public speaking, with managerial skills, with negotiation, with drafting documents, writing bills, and sitting down with people, convincing them that X is the right way to go when they walked in believing Z was the correct way. So, all of those things really built my confidence to where I was able to bring that aspect of me into the work and not be intimidated by “no” or not be intimidated by “not today.” And not having things shake me as easily as someone who I think had absolutely no career or worked in an environment where all my clients were lawyers, so everybody felt that they were right.

Kristina, an animal rights lawyer, found that her prior work environment provided her with incredible training.

It was working at a law firm. There's a lot of discipline. There were a lot of rules a lot of procedures, a lot of best practices. And I really think that the experience I had working with the people I worked with at that firm was like incredible training. Because, I had such a healthy appreciation for having a lot of structure around stupid things like, how do you name a document? How do you save it too, so that people can see? And I realized that those kinds of things, aren't just, someone's persnickety preference.

Ekatarina states that her former corporate years were instrumental in providing her the knowledge of business fundamentals.

With all the years that I spent in the corporate, with all the years that I spent in different markets, different functions, I learned all the business fundamentals, and how to run the business on different models. And I think that's the knowledge that I carry with me. And that's what helps.

Like Ekatarina, Akira values her prior work experience, believing that it gave her a blueprint on ways to approach business and grow her network.

I think my previous experience only helps me. It only helps me because it gave me a blueprint of ways to attack business, examples of things that work well, things that don't work well. It gave me networks of people . . . It gave me time to work with them so that they can get to know me and my talents, and I get to know them and their talents. And it also gave me what I needed to be frustrated enough to move on.

Rose expresses how her prior business experience of fundraising, managing people, and creating budgets were of immense help.

It helped because of the nature of the job I had, I had to be very organized, I had created budgets and all that, so I had experience in fundraising, I had experience in managing people, managing parts of a business, I had experienced training people. So, all of that came into play.

Similarly, Agatha describes how the corporate world gave her gravitas, credibility, and confidence.

I was in the corporate world there. I was a manager of people. And then, [I was] the marketing expert. [It] help[ed] me for sure because it gave me the structure, the competence, the gravitas, also these types of things. I feel that I was credible. When I did this transition, I was credible enough because I came from that world. It gave me the self-confidence to do this type of a new job, having a certain type of credibility. That's for sure. Also, from a business sense perspective, it helped me a lot.



Yumi, in reflecting on her 20-year career in academia, explains that time had informed her of her expertise and guided her as to what she could offer.

It helped me to see possibilities of what I do now. How that can be as simple as used in that context, so having spent nearly 20 years and knowing what it's like to be in that field have informed me of my business or my expertise how it can be better used or marketed in that field. It would be more interesting if I only stuck in one position as just teacher, but I also had an administration position too where I lead a group, a faculty. I had hiring decisions. I had ability to plan. I also managed conflicts and all of that. So, that all was learning for me. Then informed me of what I can offer.

Belinda concurs with other participants in describing how her prior work experience had been instrumental in helping her identify the soul of her business.

I started this vision that I'm currently living, I started it after leaving one agency for one of my clients. And it was a project in a company that [I] couldn't say no to. So, I actually started Agility Strategies, went and worked for another company, came back to Agility Strategies. And I would say that it was actually a really good detour for a second company because that company really focused on organizational culture and structure and having a purpose, very much of a purpose and then they were in the business of helping other companies find their purpose. So it was extremely helpful for me to kind of realize at that point what the soul of my business is, and its flexibility and freedom, both for the people who work with Agility Strategies in their own lives, but also for the clients to have more flexibility and working with an agency.

One participant, Aamori, a woman of color, found that operating in a corporate setting where she felt she could not be her authentic self, helped her realize that she did not want to be in that work culture.

Well, one, it helped because I realized I did not want to be stuck in that environment for 20 something years. I did not feel like my authentic self in that space. But I do think for us leaving corporate there's also that extra, not only being a woman, but there's that extra thing where you're just kind of doing things to keep up with the Joneses, but you're always not sure how you're perceived or how you present yourself, all these things. And I was like you know what? I don't want to be in a work culture like that.

### **Having an Execution Strategy**

63% of participants described having an execution strategy as being critical to their successful transition.

Sydney shares that she tactically changed her role in the last months she was employed to help her transition more easily.

And there are things that I also did while I was still employed that were able to help me transition better. So about six months or so before I had set my date, I was able to actively change my position into something where I didn't have so many people reporting to me. I took a special project where I was already naturally having people transition to somebody else.

Yumi explains that she had to identify her strengths and weaknesses similar to using a SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis is a planning activity used to help individuals and/or organizations identify their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for strategic purposes related to personal or organizational planning.

I first had to identify what I could offer up, or what my resources were, or what I'm good at, basically. And at the same time also acknowledge where I needed help and in what areas. Sort of, like the SWOT analysis. That was the first process. So, what I was good at and what I needed to do because I already knew where I wanted to be, although, it was abstract.

Mandy shares that utilizing a spreadsheet and a pros and cons list was her approach to a smooth transition. “The thing that helps me transition every time is just really being able to break everything down ... I live my life by spreadsheets, and I live my life by pros and cons. And it's about building blocks.”

Charlotte outlines her approach of diligently reviewing a long list of startups she could potentially approach for work opportunities.

I was a little bit lost at the beginning. I didn't end up knowing which direction to go but also, I used another approach [scouring] a list of about . . . Initially it was 100, but now it's closer to 200 startups that are about to boom or that are on his list of very promising startups. I went through that list diligently, and I made a list of the ones that I felt could be interesting to me, and then I basically started looking through my network to see who I knew who could know someone there, or who could . . . Yeah. Trying to get in touch with people within those companies that I had identified. It was very methodical.

Rose shares that she put a business plan together and started reaching out to the community. “So, we just started putting a plan together, [a] business plan, we started reaching out to the community, everyone was so supportive, so we got lots of input from them.

Sharon found that having a process took the pressure off her approach.

Having a process. . . I've got a friend who says, "The process takes pressure off people." And having that process took some pressure off, gave me some guard rails and handles to just sort of dial in a little bit more about what this behind purpose thing meant.

Linda's plan of execution was centered on building relationships. “I spent a great deal of time building relationships, starting very small, starting in the pockets that I knew.” On the other hand, Claritta's strategy involved keeping her plans hidden. “What I did do was not tell a soul.”

Piloting and testing their vision were also noted as strategies for some participants.

Agatha found herself storytelling her vision and observing trusted people's reactions to her idea.

Testing the idea was, at the beginning it was my idea. The idea of my personal vision was a bit vague. It was in my mind. Testing the idea was to storytelling and understanding the reaction from people who I trusted. How do they react, if they see me in that field or not, what comes to their mind.

Belinda similarly tested her business hypothesis around a group of freelancers coming together to work as one team.

And as we did that, one critical juncture was to see, to sort of test the hypothesis and that group of people who are not technically employed by the same company, can a group of freelancers, independent contractors come together in a unified way as a cohesive team? That was sort of question number one I had. And when I proved that to be the case, and in fact, even to deliver better work than agencies that have had existing teams, that was a real turning point for me because I realized, not only is this a nice way of life, this is actually a better way of working.

## **Belief in Oneself**

33% of participants spoke of their belief in themselves as having helped during their transition. Edina shares how she felt stronger and often rose to the occasion. “I think one of the

things [is] that I am so much stronger than I know. I think I always thought I was a strong person but there are aspects of myself that really just rose to the occasion.”

Salome states that trust in herself and her gut was paramount. “I think it was really learning to trust myself more. To trust my intuition, to trust the feeling that I . . . the gut feeling that I developed.”

Claritta shows the words that she tattooed on her side as a reminder to believe in oneself.

I tell you what helps me, my tattoo. It says “passion, courage.” Passion, oh God I can't remember. Gosh, I know the last one is believe. It's passion, courage, something believe. And I've had it tattooed on my side. And what I mean by that is if you have courage, you have passion and belief in yourself, you will succeed. I think trust is the other one actually. So, trust in yourself and you will succeed. So, it helps I've had it tattooed down my side.

Claritta goes on to describe how she did not doubt her choice to relocate to Argentina.

It was me completely solo. I was like, I'm not telling anybody because they'll think I'm mad. And until I have an argument that they will be comfortable with, I'm not telling them because I have no doubt what I'm doing. I didn't talk to anybody, nobody, nobody.

Linda concurs with the other participants that her beliefs in herself have been strengthened. “I think what has helped is my beliefs in myself have been strengthened.”

### **Self-Care Practices**

Some women (21%) found self-care practices to be extremely helpful in the journey to fulfilling their vision. These practices often took the form of meditation, journaling, creative visualization, or seeking therapy. Saanvi shares that she selects self-care over work. “I prioritize self-care over work,” and integrates meditation and journaling.

A lot of meditation, a lot of journaling, being intentional about who I want to be, how I want to show up. Yeah. That's been a lot of work, and daily practices. I really believe the daily practice routine is what matters over motivation. I really believe [in] discipline above anything else for success.

Sharon found that seeking beauty through imagery helped her in her journey.

I can just devour magazines and sort of tear sheets from magazines and assembling concepts from magazines, like really being present with images, flower arranging, helping people decorate their homes, being in music. Yeah. Just sort of seeking out beauty.

Dahab reflects on the benefits she had gained from yoga and meditation and the important role it plays in her wellbeing.

I think what helps me through [is] just more yoga, more meditation, and also more of doing nothing which has lasted for a solid year, is to also realize that there is so much wisdom in my body, that there's so much wisdom in my intuition that I shut down. And so I think knowing just with my head is not enough, that actually I need to tap into something that is more intuitive, or not that I need to, that I also just need to nurture, nurture my intuition, nurture my body, take care of myself, take care of what I invite, in terms of people, in terms of just energy, honestly. It sounds really fluffy, but the context where I am is really important to my wellbeing.

Magdalena mentions how therapy helped her in this transition period. "I think how I overcame it was really therapy coaching, talking a lot, really processing."

### **Financial Security**

For some women (21%), financial security enabled them to fulfill their vision. They saw themselves in a privileged position devoid of financial concerns as they embarked on their vision. Charlotte mentions being at a point where she was financially secure and could afford to take the risk to pursue her vision. "I think I was at a point where financially I felt I could afford to take that risk, take two or three years and then do what I, at the end of the day, really wanted to do and have more fun working."

Other participants mention benefiting from the financial support of their spouses. Aamori explains how her husband had been able to provide financially, which gave her wiggle room.

I had a little more wiggle room, because I had someone that was still, my husband was still providing so I didn't feel like, "Oh, I'm leaving this cushy job that's paying me a lot in order to make this job.

Arlette shares how grateful she was that her husband was supportive of her choice.

I kept pushing, not making any money, thank God my husband was supportive of this too because had I not had that, I did not have enough savings to really launch into this on my own. I would've been able to do it, but I would've had to have a full-time job in order to support myself, therefore, I would've had to have something that I did for the sake of doing it in order to do something else

Saanvi declares that being in a country with a social system was liberating in terms of her knowing that she would not be financially stressed for the next year.

What helps me is to know that I live in a country that has a social system. I don't have financial stress for the next year. I have one year to test out this idea and make it happen. If not, I mean, I have a decent CV. I think I can find a job.

Yumi explains that she did not have to work, which meant that financial achievement was secondary to her. "I have the privilege of I don't have to work. So, financial success was secondary to me."

### **Spiritual Faith**

A few women spoke of their connection with spirituality as an enabling force in their journeys. Magdalena expresses how her trust in God underlined all that she did. "And my faith, I think. I have a lot of faith. I think I've always trusted . . . Put it in God's hands. I think that, that's underlined in everything."

Edina also spoke of being reassured by her spirituality.

I think because of my faith, that day that I was describing to you when I was leaving the law firm and looking up and just I looked up at God and I was like, "Oh yeah." But I heard these words in my spirit, "you will not lack."

Likewise, Sharon found herself connected to her faith and began spending more time in prayer. "I carv[ed] out an inordinate amount of time in quiet reflection and prayer, like what would feel like stupid time, like stupid amounts of time from a corporate perspective."

## Self-Doubt

46% of participants mentioned self-doubt as an element that hindered them in fulfilling their vision. Akira expresses that her biggest challenge was constantly second-guessing herself during her transition.

The biggest challenge was questioning . . . So, it's actually a different challenge then. It was not knowing if what you're doing is right. And it's weird because you're doing this because you believe in it, but we're all human. And so, I question everything that I do.

Kristina, who was burned out upon leaving her prior job, started doubting her decision and questioning her move.

I wish I hadn't been so burnt out when I left the job. I wish that I had made this choice from a place of security so that it truly was it, I wasn't seeing it as like a life raft. I was instead seeing it as, "No I'm in a good spot, but I'd like to try this." And so, then I started doubting, was this the right thing to do? Should I have tried harder to work something out with my boss at my old firms? Should I probably go to a different firm first?

Yumi, who left academia for self-employment, wondered whether she could run both a successful business and a household.

One of the most obvious things was, "Can I do it all?" Because I'm also pursuing a degree and having a child and a whole house. So, "Can I do it all?" Was the first. And then, "Can I make it? Can I make it?" Doubts, I think those were major . . . Yeah, while pleasing everyone. Because I think women are naturally pleasers. So, you want to make sure that the house is run smoothly, everyone's fed top-notch then everything is put away and cleaned while I am preparing for a six-hour workshop, waking up at the crack of dawn. So, "Can I do it? And is my business going to take off?"

Penelope, who also branched out on her own, had similar concerns as to whether she would be successful.

There was a lot of doubt. Can I actually be a good coach? You actually talk to people on their lives, it's pretty intimate. Rejection as well. Why doesn't she or he choose me as a coach? I did everything right, and they still don't go ahead? And you go, "Wow, that's a lot of self-doubt."

Likewise, a focus group participant similarly shares that as a successful recruiter, she felt “golden handcuffed to [her] recruiting job” and that her fear was amplified by her internal impostor syndrome.

I'm successful and driven, but I'm also scared to death and there's fear there, it's like the oppositions that exist in the imposter syndrome and stuff that creeps up that you're shh! So yeah, I think it's working through that too and not judging and questioning.

Similarly, Aamori found herself doubting if her choice was the right move for her and her family.

I'm like, "Is this is it for me? Is this what I'm doing for the rest of my life?" I still kind of think about that. And it's like someone once told me, "Just because you make a decision, it doesn't have to be the decision for the rest of your life." And I think something that was holding me back in the beginning, was me feeling like I had to know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. So, the reservation was, "Is this going to be the right move . . ." It's the right move for me because I know in my heart that's what I want to do. But is it the right move for my family?

Another focus group participant also shared how her desire for control hinders her from acting on her vision.

I realized that I don't like change. To be very frank, I don't. I think that's in terms of what's holding me back, I don't like change. I like control and I like things that are predictable and the thought of making any big moves feels risky and it feels like I'm going to have to give up control and just be at the mercy of whatever comes my way. And that that is deeply worrying to me. I realized that some of the choices I made, personal and professional, from a very young age have been to ensure that I retain control over my career trajectory. And so, branching out into a territory that I'm basically trying to vision and create for myself is scary.

### **Unsupportive/Unpleasant Work Environment**

33% of women shared that having to deal with unsupportive people and unpleasant work environments was a hindrance to their individual personal pursuits. Saanvi explains that her toxic work environment negatively impacted her self-esteem.

The environment I was in, the culture of the organization is quite toxic and fear-driven. What this does is it plays on your self-esteem and your confidence. There's a tendency to feel you're not good enough and you are no one without the system around you. That



hindered me. It took me a while to gain the self-confidence to say, "I'm more than just this job or I'm more than just this environment."

Penelope shares how her family was skeptical about her decision and how their questions drained her energy.

Some of my family, they go, "What are you doing with this stuff out there?" They've been more working in a corporate world, and that's what they've been doing, that's what they know, and then I go, "Well, okay, no point talking to them. They just drain my energy. I'd rather talk to people who give me energy, we can inspire each other."

Reka describes a similar experience and opted to be more mindful of the conversations she has around her. "I've learned how to quiet that chatter and also, I'm more mindful of what kinds of conversations I can have with who and when." Ekatarina also found her community to be more skeptical rather than encouraging. "In terms of for environment and people, they were more skeptical, I think, than supportive. Because they were thinking, why?"

One participant, Kristina, shares how in transitioning to CEO and Executive Director at an Animal Rights Agency, her peers rejected her and refused to recognize her as their boss.

Once I became CEO and executive director, there were so many things that were frustrating. That was such a huge transition because now I had all the people who had been my peers were now reporting to me and some of them just flat out rejected it, they just would not recognize me as their boss. So that was very frustrating. And yeah, I would say that was frustrating.

## **Financial Strain**

29% of participants mentioned financial strain as a hindering factor. Nora, who started a leadership training consultancy, felt it challenging to have to generate income at the expense of her vision.

The two other things that come to mind in terms of challenges are generating income at the expense of our vision. And so, for example, Arrow ended up with a project that really shouldn't be an Arrow project. Because just post-pandemic, I really felt responsibility to generate income for everyone else and I compromised what our vision was.

Ekatarina shares her financial concerns of moving from a well-paid role to being self-employed where one needs to earn a salary before being able to pay oneself.

There were financial challenges. As you move from your well-paid role to the role where no one wants to pay you, you didn't earn yet anything. There, you have to cope with less earnings, or you need to rely . . . And you actually need to earn your salary before you pay it to yourself.

Kristina echoes Ekatarina's sentiment, as she found the pay cut much harder than anticipated despite working just as many hours.

So, the pay cut was harder for me than I thought it was going to be because in part, it wasn't just the practical can you pay your bills? But the, "I'm working almost as hard and almost as many hours." And trying to justify, why did you leave? You're working this hard, you're stressed as much, all of this you're thinking so much less. And that I couldn't have anticipated. I thought that the work was going to be less stressful, [and that] my hours [would get] significantly better.

Penelope also shared that financials were of concern "Definitely financial. That was . . . yeah, some reservation around that or concern."

A focus group participant also shares that her financial concerns hindered her from taking the leap.

I feel like on some levels I embrace risk, because it's not like I'm totally risk averse, but taking the jump to actually, sort of eat what you kill, kind of concept of having to make the money to support my horses, which are very expensive. And now I've got a little girl, it's always been that sort of, "Do I have what it takes to actually build a business enough to actually feed me and my horses and now a little girl," that's the biggest fear for me.

Along the same vein, another focus group participant shares that her self-doubt narrative around money kept resurfacing and holding her back.

It's totally mindset. Like it's 100% fear and getting over this narrative, this one we play that like my partner won't be able to take the weight since I've been the person that has made more money throughout our courtship, which is bullshit, because he actually . . . My business got decimated last year and his business went up. So, I know that it's just a story and an old narrative than I need to cut. But I think for me, it's just this fear of, "What if."

## **Overwhelming Work/Personal Demands**

21% of women mentioned personal demands and work overwhelm as areas that were hindering factors in their transition. Nora shares that her caregiving responsibilities took tremendous energy away from her vision of her work. “And certainly until last month, the amount of time taking care of my mom. That both of which of course was an honor and a privilege to do. And it took tremendous energy away from my vision for my work.”

Charlotte realized that creating a company was incredibly hard, to the point where she cried a few times in the process.

It's really hard to create a company. I knew it would be hard, but it's even harder. It's really hard. It's tough. It's really tougher. I think I've cried a few times the past few months, just like it's so hard. Some of the moments were really hard. Someone told me the highs, the lows, and the ugly of creating your company, and the ugly is, I think, a very good word. But when it works, like when you get an order, it's the most exciting thing.

Kristina holds similar thoughts and shares how her job remained difficult, despite being in a different environment.

I thought that the work was going to be less stressful, my hours significantly better. And that was just wrong because you're still after all a lawyer, and the deadlines don't just get extended, or the complexity of your briefs that you're not that the complexity of the law doesn't get better when you're talking about animals in some place, it gets worse because the law isn't great for animals, so you have to be more creative. So, that was difficult.

Penelope had also thought that her situation would be easier based on other people sharing their successes, but she discovered that she was perhaps too optimistic and that it was in fact, a lot of work.

I thought it would be easier. I was meeting these people and they would all show you and tell you about their success and what they'd all done. A lot of people don't talk about what actually didn't go well here, or there . . . so I thought, it's probably a bit easier . . . especially becoming a coach. I thought, "Oh, you just do this, and you have all these clients. No, it's not like that, it's actually a lot of hard work, so I probably realized . . . maybe I was a bit too optimistic, I don't know.

## **Leaving Established Environments/Work Relationships**

Some women (21%) realized that they were hindered by leaving established environments and existing work relations. Penelope reflects on the difficulties of leaving her company, one that afforded her many opportunities.

What hindered me was probably the offer of staying with nice colleagues, so that also made it hard. And the family, also. I had lots of good opportunity and I traveled around the world with this company. They gave me a lot of opportunities. It was . . . I never would say a bad word on them at all. I didn't leave out of frustration, that's the thing.

Rose explains that she missed the comradery of the people she used to work with. "You miss the comradery and the people you work with." Kristina also longed for the level of quality and intelligent coworkers she had at her prior company.

It was great to have that experience and have that as the model of this is how you behave in the workplace. This is the kind of work product you deliver; this is the highest quality you should strive for, but at the same time it was a hindrance because I went into all my other environments expecting that everyone was going to be that way. And it just wasn't the case. And then I would long for that. I would miss it, Oh, I missed having so many really smart people who think really deeply about these issues.

A focus group participant concurs with Rose about the thought of leaving established patterns or a chosen direction. She expresses concern at the prospect of closing the chapter on what she has spent the last years seeking, the desire to become a parent.

What's hindered me from a transition as well as what my current struggle is, is that really 100% fully committing to this new journey means acceptance of leaving what I've poured so much of my existence into, the past six years doing. So, it's like really deciding, to make a decision to close the book, trying to conceive and just kind of accepting that that's making a conscious decision that you're not going to try anymore

Lastly, Sharon worried about the ramifications of leaving an established environment. "How will I maintain my lifestyle? What if my lifestyle changes? What does that mean for my friendships, enjoyment, and all of the things that I thought were so important?"

### **The Virtual Focus Group**

A group comprised of six women with a personal vision who have not yet transitioned to their desired reality were invited for a virtual focus group discussion. Prompted by two questions linked to their lived experiences, participants shared their perspectives related to the pursuit of their personal vision. Four out of six participants revealed that their need for personal fulfillment and desire to right an injustice was the motivation to pursue their personal vision. This is similar to the strong majority of participants (79%) who were interviewed individually and stated the same reason.

In relation to factors currently deterring the virtual focus group from acting on their personal vision, four out of six participants mentioned fear of the unknown/risk as a roadblock to their pursuit. In comparison, only 11% of the participants interviewed individually mentioned fear of the unknown as a limiting factor to transition to their desired reality. However, they mentioned personal issues as the main challenge they had to overcome which was also identified by the focus group.

Only one focus group participant spoke of leveraging informal learning avenues to pursue her personal vision, while (100%) of participants interviewed individually spoke of using informal channels as an essential approach to transitioning to their desired reality.

### **Summary of Findings**

The four major findings from the study were presented in this chapter. The findings were arranged in four separate categories based on each research question. The participants' responses, as well as information garnered from the virtual learning discussion, were used to understand their lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon of women transitioning out of

established careers to pursue a personal vision. Direct quotes from the participants were included to represent their own words and experiences as recounted by them.

The first finding revealed that the overwhelming majority of participants were intrinsically motivated to act on their personal vision. Most of the women indicated that their need for personal fulfillment was their main motivator. This included a desire to help others, the pursuit of a different lifestyle, and the wish for more flexibility. A large number of women also spoke of extrinsic motivators such as a transformative event as having played a role in their decision.

The second finding was that a vast majority of women revealed that their primary challenge to transitioning to their desired reality was linked to personal issues. They identified a number of internal concerns that ranged from loneliness to feelings of insecurity, identity loss, and a fear of the unknown. The women named lacking a strategy or plan for executing their visions as a challenge as well. Several participants were also faced with external issues such as lacking support from others and lacking resources, while others spoke of having experienced discrimination as a challenge to their personal pursuit.

The third finding outlined that most of the women learned to overcome their challenges through self-reflection, rather than through formal methods. Participants shared the informal ways in which they learned, including self-reflection, networking and dialoguing with others, learning from experience and through role models and mentors. Participants also reported learning through formal channels by means of attending classes or hiring a professional coach.

The fourth finding revealed that all participants in the study identified having a supportive community/a supportive family as playing a significant role in transitioning to their desired reality. The factors that participants reported helped them to successfully transition

included their prior work experience, an execution strategy, and a belief in their aspirations and abilities. The women also shared the factors that hindered their transition process, which revolved around self-doubt, unsupportive environments, and financial strain. The virtual focus group participants expressed these same hindering factors.

The findings identified in this chapter helped to address the research problem, which was to understand how women with a personal vision successfully transition to their desired reality. In order to make meaning of each of the findings, each research question was listed alongside the major finding statement and this statement was rewritten as an analytic category.

### **Analytic Categories**

In order to gain greater insights and make meaning from the findings for analysis, the researcher linked each of the four research questions with the major findings' statements, and progressed to answering the main question of the study – how do women with a personal vision leave an established situation and transition to their desired reality?

The analytic categories derived from the answers to the central question framed the findings for analysis and synthesis. The findings revealed that the women were motivated by their need for personal fulfillment (Analytic Category 1). They overcame their personal issues in informal ways and were able to transition to their desired reality by having a supportive community (Analytic Category 2). The findings were then examined through these categories as shown in Table 6. The analysis, synthesis and interpretation of these findings are presented in Chapter V.

**Table 6**

***Relationship between Research Questions and Findings Leading to Analytic Categories.***

*Analytic categories for how professional women with a personal vision leave an established situation and transition to their desired reality.*

Research Question	Finding statement	
How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?	A strong majority of participants (79%) revealed that their need for personal fulfillment was what motivated them to act on their personal vision.	→ Pursuing a need for personal fulfillment
What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?	A strong majority of participants (79%) revealed that their primary challenge to transitioning to their desired reality was linked to personal/emotional issues.	↓
How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they face?	The vast majority of participants (92%) learned to overcome their challenges through self-reflection, rather than through formal methods.	→ Overcoming challenges through informal ways and through having a supportive community
What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?	All participants (100%) in this study identified having a supportive community/a supportive family as a significant helping factor in transitioning to their desired reality.	↗

An adaptation of Volpe's (2011) model for synthesizing findings

Women transition to their desired reality by:

- Pursuing a need for personal fulfillment
- Overcoming challenges in informal ways and by having a supportive community



## **CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research study was to explore with a group of 24 women, how they came to pursue their personal vision and transition to what was for them a new desired reality. The researcher sought to shed light on the phenomenon where women with a personal vision leave an established situation to transition to their desired reality. It was hoped that the findings would help identify recommendations, tactics and strategies for professional coaches, educators, HR practitioners, and organizations to use as tools to support and promote women's professional growth and personal well-being.

### **Research Questions**

In order to carry out this research and shed light on this phenomenon, the following questions were addressed:

1. How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?
2. What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition to achieve their personal goal?
3. How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they face?
4. What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?

The four research questions were largely satisfied by the findings shared in Chapter IV.

### **Findings**

The four major findings revealed from the research questions were the following:

1. A strong majority of participants (79%) revealed that their need for personal fulfillment was what motivated them to act on their personal vision.

2. A strong majority of participants (79%) revealed that their primary challenge to transitioning to their desired reality was linked to personal/emotional issues.
3. An overwhelming majority of participants (92%) learned to overcome their challenges through self-reflection, rather than through formal methods.
4. All participants (100%) in this study identified having a supportive community/a supportive family as a significant helping factor in transitioning to their desired reality.

In this chapter, the researcher attempts to provide analytical and interpretive insights into the findings outlined in Chapter IV. The researcher is conscious that the information garnered from the interviews is a glimpse into what participants recalled in that specific moment in time. In response, the researcher has opted to use participants' collective data to propose analytical categories that could be studied and tested for additional research theory advancement and practice.

While the Findings Chapter covered brief segments of objective data emerging from the individual narratives in alignment with each research question, this chapter combines the various parts into an interconnected and subjective view of the research phenomenon. The process is guided by the following analytical categories that were introduced at the end of the Findings Chapter:

Women successfully transition to their desired reality by:

- a) Pursuing a need for personal fulfillment
- b) Overcoming challenges in informal ways and by having a supportive community

The researcher has used these two categories to seek congruence and higher meaning. The chapter is structured around these two analytic categories. The chapter culminates with the

revisiting of assumptions identified in Chapter I; the contributions to the literature the researcher makes, and her personal reflections of the dissertation journey.

### **Groupings of Participants by Their Behavioral Tendencies**

The participants spoke openly about their experience of transitioning to their desired reality. Based on the participant interviews, the beliefs, thoughts, and examples they shared, the researcher assigned participants into three groups with different behavioral tendencies. These groups are not strictly distinct, but rather are proposed as a way to capture behaviors, and as such, there are instances where the groups overlap. The three groups overlap in that in each category, the participants experienced a supportive community, were self-directed in identifying how to transition to their desired reality, and engaged in critical self-reflection and personal development.

The three groups are loosely identified as Seekers (6 participants), Go-Getters (7 participants), and Explorers (11 participants).

#### **Seekers**

All Seekers were motivated to help and empower others and relied strongly on their intuition for guidance. They also sought continued formal training to increase their coaching skill set. They sought authenticity and meaning and used their personal insights as anchors. The Seekers were all challenged by personal issues, namely self-doubt and had a medium tolerance for risk. Most had strong ties to family and upbringing and experienced a supportive community and family environment. All Seekers were certified coaches who had held manager to senior level positions. The majority are childless.

#### **Go-Getters**

The Go-Getters were powered by challenge, decisive, and committed to their personal vision. Participants in this category tended to have identified a vision or a dream from an early

phase in their career and had identified an execution strategy to reach their desired reality. Half of the Go-Getters had engaged with a mentor, and all had experienced a supportive community, and some were also actively engaged in women's networking groups. The Go-Getters were all accomplished Senior Level Executives with high levels of ambition. The majority of the Go-Getters had no children.

### **Explorers**

Most of the Explorers were parents and for the majority, parenting influenced their life choices and personal vision. They valued balance and placed high value on experimentation and exploration. Most placed emphasis on balancing family and professional life and felt fortunate to have experienced a supportive community and in particular, a supportive family. A few were engaged with a networking community. Many Explorers were challenged by a lack of resources and had lacked a plan of execution and took the opportunity to upskill.

Table 7 provides a more detailed overview of the above-mentioned categories.

**Table 7****Evidence of Groupings of Participants by Behavioral Tendencies**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Seekers (6)</b>	Agatha Magdalena Penelope Salome Sharon Sydney	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All participants sought authenticity and meaning making</li> <li>• All participants attended formal training (courses, certifications, classes)</li> <li>• All were motivated to help and empower others</li> <li>• All were challenged by personal/emotional issues, namely self-doubt</li> <li>• All were actively engaged in their community</li> <li>• All had a medium tolerance for risk</li> <li>• All had strong ties to family values/upbringing</li> </ul>
<b>Go-Getters (7)</b>	Akira Belinda Chloe Claritta Edina Kristina Mandy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All were accomplished and high achieving employees</li> <li>• All acted on a desire for a different lifestyle</li> <li>• All had an execution strategy for their personal vision</li> <li>• Half of the participants engaged with a mentor</li> <li>• Three are actively engaged in a women’s business network</li> <li>• Two acted on childhood dreams</li> </ul>
<b>Explorers (11)</b>	Aamori Arlette Charlotte Dahab Ekaterina Linda Nora Rose Saanvi Reka Yumi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All placed a high value on experimentation and exploration</li> <li>• All were challenged by personal/emotional issues</li> <li>• The majority had a low tolerance for risk and half expressed a fear of the unknown</li> <li>• The majority lacked a plan of execution</li> <li>• Nine Explorers took opportunities to upskill</li> <li>• All parents placed emphasis on balancing family and professional life</li> <li>• All parents expressed that parenting influenced their life choices and vision</li> <li>• Four Explorers were challenged by a lack of resources</li> </ul>

**Analysis****Analytic Category 1: Pursuing Personal Fulfilment**

The first research question sought to examine what led women to identify and become motivated to pursue a personal vision. From the study, 79% of the women described being motivated by a need for personal fulfillment. Similarly, a study by Grunert and Bodner (2011) on women’s self-efficacy beliefs and career choices found that a sense of fulfillment was the primary motivator behind career choices of participants. Further, the authors noted that women spoke of “looking for fulfillment in a career and wanting to find their life’s calling” (p. 424).

Research has shown that work fulfillment leads to higher subjective well-being. Research by Bennett and Dann (2000) on the motivation of female entrepreneurs also found that they were motivated by fulfillment, independence, and a need for satisfaction. Each of the ways in which participants identified their need for personal fulfillment will be examined through the lens of the three loosely defined groups: The Go-Getters, The Seekers, and The Explorers.

The Seekers were the smallest group and arrived at their need for personal fulfillment through a journey of introspection. In particular, the Seekers spent considerable time reflecting on their life journey and sought ways to help others. They had strong ties to family values, and most were in a relationship. Four out of six Seekers do not have children.

All of the Seekers held manager or senior-level positions and became professional coaches, intent on helping individuals create meaningful impact in organizations. Magdalena shared that she always wanted to help people and inspire them to lead fulfilled lives. Penelope equally highlighted how she felt compelled to give back to society and enable individuals to increase their impact in the world. It was important for the Seekers to contribute to society, and they sought to be continuous learners in order to benefit others. Thus, developing individual talent was a strong motivator for them and in this manner, they found fulfillment.

The Go-Getters were the second-largest group of participants. Similar to the Seekers, most women in this group were childless. All women in this group were accomplished senior-level executives with a high level of visibility within their respective organizations. They worked in complex environments that gave them confidence. The women in this group have all worked in high-pressure environments and as a result were accustomed to working under challenging conditions. They had solid reputations but were no longer fulfilled by their jobs and therefore, looked to make a change. The majority of women in this group were seeking a different lifestyle

and some were prompted to make a shift after experiencing a transformative event. Edina, for example, found herself resigning from her job a few days after reading a book, titled *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, by Parker Palmer (1999) that gave new meaning to her life and challenged her thinking.

The Go-Getters were keenly focused on their personal goals, were self-assured, determined, and decisive in pursuing their personal vision. Two participants in particular had childhood dreams that served as a catalyst to fulfilling their personal visions. Mandy shared that for as long as she could remember, she had always wanted to own a horse and she ultimately became the owner of a horse farm. Kristina spoke of her commitment to animal rights, and she followed her dream and became an animal rights activist. Bades' (2020) study also revealed that women's entrepreneurial motivations include a desire to fulfill a *long-held dream*.

The Go-Getters had strong self-awareness and used terminology to that effect. For example, Akira shared she could always do what she believed she could do. Belinda likewise said she wanted an "a la carte lifestyle." Women in this group demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy and exhibited behaviors akin to Hakim's (2000) "Preference Theory." Preference Theory, a model for women's career, life ambitions, and priorities, identifies three ways that describe and predict women's choices between *market work* and *family work*. The author describes women's behavioral preferences as *adaptive, work-centered, or home-centered*.

The Go-Getters were work-centered women and were the group that made the most life-altering professional transitions. Chloe attended a women's networking event and became so dismayed at the women's inability to find professional support to reenter the workforce that it prompted her to leave her C-Suite banking position to start a women's collaborative space focused on enabling women to have a voice. These types of events were catalysts for

transitioning to different lifestyles. For some, difficult work conditions also served as catalysts for transition. The Seekers, like the Go-Getters fall into the category of work-centered women and are particularly heavily invested and interested in continued professional training.

The Explorers, with 11 members, were the largest group. Unlike the Go-Getters, most of whom are childless, the Explorers had the most children. As per Hakim's (2000) Preference Theory, they aligned with the category of *Adaptive*. Consequently, they are dedicated to family and parenting and this role influenced their life choices. As an extension of the concept of family, this group was drawn to empowering others, particularly children. For example, one participant mentioned how working with children helped her clarify her vision. As a parent of a child with Down Syndrome, she started an organization based on her child's diagnosis.

Due to the demands of juggling work and family, the majority of the Explorers continually sought balance. At the same time, they also looked for flexibility as a way to achieve even more fulfillment in life.

The participants from the virtual focus group had the same intrinsic motivators to pursue their personal vision as the participants interviewed for the study.

A fuller description of how participants described what led them to their personal vision can be found in Appendix Q.

### **Analytic Category 2: Women overcome challenges in informal ways and by having a supportive community**

This analytic category was used to discuss the following three research questions:

1.) What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition? 2.) How did they learn to overcome those challenges? 3.) What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?



The women in the study encountered a host of challenges, primarily of a personal or emotional nature, and they learned to overcome these challenges in informal ways and by having a supportive community. The primary personal challenges participants encountered as they transitioned to their desired reality were self-doubt, fear, loneliness, and a loss of identity.

### ***Challenges Encountered***

#### *Experiencing Self-doubt*

The overwhelming majority of Seekers and Explorers spoke of a lack of confidence, courage, and low self-esteem as having been personal challenges they had to overcome. In contrast, only one Go-Getter mentioned self-doubt as a personal challenge. Seekers and Explorers equally expressed self-doubt as being a personal challenge. The Go-Getters expressed minor concern with personal issues and were more focused on practical challenges linked to executing on their personal vision. For example, Claritta mentioned administrative matters as being the primary issues she had to navigate at the time. A detailed description of the differences among the three groups with respect to self-doubt can be found in Appendix R.

#### *The Fear Factor*

Fear of the unknown was mentioned by all three groups, however, the nuances in what was feared differed among the Go-Getters and the two other groups. Two of the Go-Getters expressed fear of financial instability. Edina, for example, describes the negative psychological effects of financial instability. “The psychological impact of seeing money decrease every month with nothing coming in was very triggering and that in itself would occasionally create this fear of the unknown.”

In contrast, the Seekers and the Explorers voiced concerns related to being unprepared for a transition. Fear of the unknown was most frequently mentioned in Seekers (67%) and

Explorers (50%). The Go-Getters mentioned fear at (25%). From these percentages, while the Seekers and Explorers experienced high levels of fear and anxiety, the Go-Getters were less affected by these negative feelings, which enabled them to make bold decisions. See Appendix T for a description among participants with respect to fear of the unknown.

### *The Only and Lonely*

Only two Go-Getters exhibited feelings of loneliness in the transition process. Kristina missed bouncing ideas off others, while Belinda simply felt isolated working from home alone. In comparison, most of the Seekers expressed missing former colleagues, former work environments, and feeling lonely on their journey. Almost all Seekers mentioned the loss of their tight-knit community of professionals and their desire to belong to a community once again. Similarly, the Explorers were challenged with feelings of loneliness in the transition process.

### *Working Identity*

The Seekers were the only group that expressed grappling with the fear of losing their *working identity*, i.e., how a person defines themselves in a work context (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016). Some were apprehensive about their transition, likening it to “identity threat,” the belief that tests a person’s unique personal and social identity (Ibarra, 2014; Breakwell, 1983). In contrast, neither the Go-Getters nor Explorers referred to their working identity. Given that the Seekers were the only group to talk about working identity, an evidence table of their perceptions of their working identity can be found in Appendix T.

### *Learning in Informal Ways*

Belenky et al. (1997) highlight that women gain knowledge by reflecting on their experiences, engaging with others, and by fostering nurturing relationships. For this category, how women learn was organized around three themes that emerged; self-reflection, dialoguing

with others, and experience. In this manner, all of the women created informal learning opportunities.

### *Self-reflection*

As cited in the literature review, reflection and discourse can help support individuals in gaining new perspectives and insights about their assumptions and can help them to push through learning blocks. Reflection allows for the new experience to become the ‘container’ through which meaning making takes place (Nicolaides & Yorks, 2008). This type of informal learning was exhibited in all three groups who learned to overcome their challenges by informal means.

The Go-Getters were the sole group that mentioned learning from failure and leveraging information from their past errors. Belinda, for example, expressed the lessons learned from her failed start-up. Mandy revealed that the skill sets she had learned earlier were applicable in the present. Edina spoke of unlearning and letting go of what no longer served her. In this sense, reflection helped participants in noticing and reevaluating their experience and using it as a learning opportunity (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1996).

In contrast, the Seekers learned primarily through introspection and by teaching others. They made specific reference to self-reflection being a part of their learning process. They also discussed leveraging their personal values as a compass in the process of self-reflection. The Explorers, similar to the Seekers, relied on personal and past experience. To the same extent, several Seekers expressed similar insights of confidence. Agatha reflects upon the newfound confidence she gained after pursuing her personal vision.

the most important learning about myself is that, after having done this, I could do anything. If I should make another transition, this would worry me much less because after the first one, I think you can do pretty much everything.

On the other hand, the Explorers primarily reflected on their personal journey influenced for the most part by their role as parents. Reka, an Explorer, states how unaware she was of putting other's needs before hers. "I didn't realize how much I was prioritizing other people's wants and needs over my own. So that was a real revelation." Similarly, Nora shares the three most significant things that she learned during her personal journey. "I think the biggest thing I had to learn...Okay, I'm going to say three words that come to mind...courage, compromise, boundaries." The Explorers, in particular, spent a lot of time reflecting on how to balance work and family priorities in pursuit of a fulfilling lifestyle. Ahn et al. (2017) posit that career changers are more self-reflective and consequently have a broader understanding and awareness of an individual's personal interests, aspirations, and ideal work environment.

#### *Dialoguing with Others*

All three groups were able to identify and connect with key individuals whom Castañeda (2019) refers to as *key supporters*; friends, colleagues, and others who were instrumental in their journey. Participants in all three groups mentioned learning through dialoguing with friends. In short, a common characteristic in all three groups was how they dialogued with others, primarily to obtain advice, have a sounding board to share their ideas and thoughts, and gather information to expand their network. In some cases, the Seekers and Explorers reached out to mentors, business coaches, and even therapists to help them deal with personal challenges. While the Go-Getters sought out business experts to assist in the practical/tactical aspects of their transitions, the Seekers and Explorers, on the other hand, reached out to mentors, coaches, and therapists to help them deal with personal challenges involved in the transition process. The evidence table of ways in which the groups learned through dialogue can be found in Appendix U.

#### *Learning from Experience*

Kolb (1984) advances that people make meaning of their lives through their lived experiences. The data revealed that participants in all three groups learned from their prior experience. Drawing on their past experience and applying their learning, most of the Go-Getters and the Seekers were methodical in planning their strategies to disengage from their present positions before embarking on their individual transitions, while less than half of the Explorers had developed such a strategy.

The Go-Getters were the sole group to mention setbacks and failures as enablers of learning and referenced how having gone through tough personal experiences prepared them to transition to another stage in their life. Similarly, the Explorers referenced being informed by their past experiences. The women in the study learned and made meaning from their experiences. They spoke of doing extensive research as a means of learning. One of the group members, Rose, referenced learning through the experience of life as a parent. Sydney, a member of the Seekers, expressed how much of a role her prior experience and learning contributed to her being able to reinvent herself today.

### *Mentoring*

A study by Castañeda, (2019), which focused on executive women exploring career changes, found that women applied several learning strategies to overcome self-limiting beliefs. Mentoring was one of the main strategies cited in this study. The Go-Getters, in particular, reported learning informally through their relationships with mentors as well as role models, confidantes, and advisers.

Weavind and McGrane (2018) advance that mentoring provides a roadmap for the personal success of professional women. Most of the Go-Getters expressed having relied on a mentor during the transition process. Edina, for example, expressed how crucial it was for her to

have female mentors who were well known in the Nigerian non-for-profit organization space. While participants cited engaging with female mentors, two of the Go-Getters chose male mentors. The research found that women benefited emotionally from having female mentors, but also found that female mentees reported significantly higher earnings when they were mentored by a male (Wallace 2001). In contrast, only one Seeker engaged with a mentor and only a few women from the Explorers sought out a mentor.

### ***Formal Learning***

While an overwhelming majority of women learned informally, formal learning was also specifically leveraged by the Seekers, who each sought courses, seminars, and workshop opportunities as part of their journey. Additionally, some also formally hired a coach. Sydney provides insight into how she worked with her coach. “I had created with my coach, some ideas about what that vision would look like.” In fact, participant Magdalena even proclaimed to being a “formal training junkie.”

The Explorers also invested in formal learning, although not to the same extent as the Seekers. Salome, for example, hired a coach to help her through her transition process. Others such as Nora chose to upskill her training expertise by enrolling in additional team coaching classes.

### ***Other Factors That Helped with The Transition***

All participants (100%) in this study identified having a supportive community/ supportive family as a significant helping factor in transitioning to their desired reality. Some of the Go-Getters referenced building community by joining women’s networks. Go-Getters, among them, Aamori, Chloe, and Mandy, expressed the importance of female-led communities

and of leveraging all of their networks. These women spoke of women's business networks as being a powerful support system.

In contrast to the Go-Getters, the Seekers referenced their engagement with communities, not necessarily women's business communities but rather groups aligned with their area of interest. Sharon, for example, found joining a ministry to be of immense support in helping her mature in her faith, while Penelope viewed her coaching community as a network that offered her learning and support.

Similar to the Go-Getters and Seekers, many Explorers joined formal groups, specifically women's groups, such as a mother's group for parental support. Aamori, for example, shares how she became part of women's networks and communities when she began asking others for help. "I think when I really started getting help, and asking for help, I was becoming a part of women's networks and communities." Aamori in particular, referenced her women's group as a *mastermind* that provided her with accountability partners. The Explorers also relied on and utilized their community comprised of friends, family, and others in a more informal manner of engagement.

All groups mentioned friends and family as being essential. The Explorers often referenced their spouses and children as being a crucial aspect of their support. Spouses were most mentioned by Explorers, which aligns with the fact that 80% of the Explorers were married. The Go-Getters were the only group who referenced business experts as being a part of their supportive community. This group also acknowledged family upbringing and values as having played a key role in providing them with support.

The virtual focus group was similar to the Seekers and Explorers in that four out of six participants mentioned fear of the unknown as inhibiting their ability to pursue their vision.

However, the individual interviewees were able to overcome their challenges in informal ways and overcame their personal issues, while the focus group participants have not leveraged their networks or community, nor have they fully overcome personal issues that may be holding them back.

### **Summary of Analysis**

Based on the participants' narratives and lived experiences, the researcher was able to identify three groups exhibiting different behavioral tendencies – The Seekers, The Go-Getters and The Explorers. The research findings were split into three analytical categories and were examined through the lens of each individual group. These groups were not strictly distinct but were rather created to capture behaviors, and as such, there were instances where the groups overlapped. Analysis was conducted in relation to the participants' descriptions of their lived experience of pursuing their personal vision and transitioning to their desired reality. Themes were extracted for higher-level meaning-making derived from these findings. In reviewing the demographic inventory against the categorical groupings, the researcher could find no discernable variable that would explain the differences or similarities among those groups.

The Seekers were the smallest group. They arrived at their need for personal fulfillment through a journey of introspection. Surprisingly, all Seekers who had held management or senior-level positions were certified coaches, and their primary driver was helping and supporting others. It was important for this group to contribute to society, and they sought to be continuous learners in order to benefit others. Developing individual talent was a strong motivator for Seekers and as a result, they were focused on self-development and had a strong drive for learning. They overcame personal challenges largely through informal ways, but also



leveraged formal learning. Similar to the Go-Getters, they were helped by a supportive community/a supportive family.

The Go-Getters were the second largest group. The women in this group were accomplished senior-level executives who had a high level of visibility within their respective organizations. They worked in high-pressure environments and as a result, were accustomed to and driven by working under challenging conditions. Unlike the Seekers, most were motivated and driven by a desire to lead a different lifestyle and in some instances, a desire to manifest a long-held dream.

The Go-Getters' decisions to act on their personal visions were due to their high level of self-efficacy, their self-confidence, and their approach to leveraging their networks as well as their mentors. They learned to overcome challenges largely through informal ways and some leveraged learning from setbacks and failures. The Go-Getters had a strong supportive community and in a number of instances, they relied on networks of businesswomen. The Go-Getters were work-centered women and were the group that made the most life-altering professional transitions.

The Explorers were the largest group. They were driven to act on their personal vision in large part by a desire to help others. Unlike the Go-Getters and the Seekers, most of whom were childless, the Explorers had the most children. As such, the majority of Explorers were dedicated and focused on family and parenting. With the demands of having to juggle work and family, the majority of the Explorers sought balance. At the same time, they also looked for flexibility as a way to achieve even more fulfillment in life. Similar to the Go-Getters and Seekers, they were able to overcome challenges in informal ways and by having a supportive community.

In addition, participants were asked to express whether they felt fulfilled after transitioning to their desired reality. The following describes their responses.

The vast majority of participants expressed feeling *fulfilled, lucky and grateful*. The word cloud below, Figure 5, is a visual representation that illustrates the words the women shared in response to the question. How often they were said by participants is indicated by the size of the word. An overwhelming number of women spoke of leading fulfilling lives.

**Figure 5**

*Word Cloud*



Edina best summed up her new reality. “I’ve never been more fulfilled, and I’ve never been more overjoyed in my life.”

## Implications of COVID-19 on Personal Vision

After all interviews were conducted, the researcher went back to participants and asked them to share their individual experiences related to COVID-19. The researcher sought to understand what if any impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on participants' personal vision. While the COVID-19 pandemic decimated jobs and industries worldwide and put millions of occupations at risk, all participants in this study indicated that they managed to continue to thrive professionally and personally amid the pandemic. In fact, the overwhelming majority ironically viewed the pandemic as a catalyst for positive change. One participant shares how COVID-19 allowed her and her family to move into a new home, which was of utmost importance to her as a mother.

I've been very spoiled with COVID. Aside from the horrible backdrop of a lot of people dying and suffering, which is awful, and because of COVID, my family was able to move into a new house, so we have plenty of space. For me being a mother, it's very important. More important than my career. I've been with my kids so much and that's just been amazing.

Another participant mentions that she had gotten extremely sick from COVID-19, which resulted in her feeling an even greater sense of urgency in expanding her work. The participants used words such as *driver*, *catalyst*, and *expansion* to express the impact of the pandemic on their personal vision. While a few participants mentioned the practical downsides that came with the pandemic, the majority saw COVID-19 as having amplified their personal vision. Participants expressed the following positive outcomes of the pandemic related to their personal vision.

- Acted as a driver for accelerating change
- Provided clarity and insights to their personal vision
- Expanded their personal vision
- Led them to pursue more meaningful and impactful work
- Allowed them to reevaluate and redefine their business model

- Enabled them to leverage technology in new creative ways
- Led them to learn new skills
- Increased their awareness of the world around them
- Brought out unexpected new opportunities
- Deepened family relationships

### **Interpretation**

In this section, the insights collected from the 24 interviews will be explored in further detail. The researcher will share views and provide possible explanations for each finding identified in the analysis section. The findings are supported by the literature. The segment is organized using the analytical categories identified in the analysis section.

#### **Analytic Category 1: Pursuing Personal Fulfilment**

Mainero and Sullivan's (2005) Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) offers a visual representation of women's shifting career patterns over time, where different phases of their lives rotate in alignment with their roles and relationships at a given juncture in their journey. These three phases, identified as authenticity, balance, and challenge, though distinct, are dynamic and operate like a kaleidoscope's three mirrors, thus remaining in perpetual motion.

With respect to the three groups, the Go-Getters sought challenge because they were free from family constraints and thus, could be adventurous. The Seekers focused on achieving authenticity because they were on a journey of self-discovery. The Explorers sought balance because of their need to juggle family and work-life issues.

All the women in this study exhibit the characteristics that Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) identify as the "three components converging into the articulation of a person's ideal self, and the resulting personal vision" (p. 626). These components are "hope, core identity, and an image of a desired future." The ideal self, which is a manifestation of a personal vision, was very clear to

each of the women. Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) propose that people who have a clear vision of how their work integrates into their ideal self have higher levels of fulfillment in their life. As was noted, the women with a personal vision integrated aspects of their work into their lifestyle of choice.

### ***The Go-Getters***

Susan Sonntag (1992), the American writer, epitomizes the philosophy of the Go-Getters when she says:

It never occurred to me that I couldn't live the life I wanted to lead. It never occurred to me that I could be stopped. I had this very simple view; that the reason people who start out with ideals or aspirations don't do what they dream of doing when they're young is because they quit. I thought, well, I won't quit. (Sonntag, as cited in Hopkins, 1992)

The Go-Getters were accomplished senior-level executives, the majority of whom had lived and worked internationally and possessed strong business acumen. Their work experiences indicate to the researcher they were motivated by challenge. Most of the Go-Getters had a master's, MBA, or doctorate, attended highly reputable universities, and had made the most extreme transitions when compared to the Seekers and the Explorers in that they changed industries and lifestyles entirely. They had a high level of self-efficacy, which is aligned with the research demonstrating that the level of education has a significant positive effect on self-efficacy in women transitioning to self-employment (Chowdhury and Endres, 2005).

They were able to make bold and challenging professional and lifestyle choices as their decisions had a relatively low impact on others. Free from family constraints, the Go-Getters were able to explore what they wanted for themselves and act swiftly once a decision was taken.

Having reached a certain level of seniority, the Go-Getters had, in addition, invested in their *human and social capital* (Terjesen 2005) and as such, were well-positioned and prepared to explore career opportunities. Human capital relates to the combination of formal and informal

education and social capital relates to a person's status within a *network of relationships*. Consequently, the Go-Getters were able to transition to their desired reality with relative ease. The researcher interprets that the women's self-concept or career anchors of autonomy and entrepreneurship, as identified by Schein (1996), facilitated their ability to navigate their transition.

In addition, a nurturing and encouraging upbringing played a significant role in their ability to pursue what they wanted for themselves.

### ***The Seekers***

*Authenticity does not stand in the way of change, but for an alleged new self to be genuinely a new self, there must be certain threads that connect it to the old self. The authentic person does not turn her back on the past, but searches for a way to integrate her present with her earlier self (Bovens, 1999, p. 228).*

In their quest for fulfillment, the majority of Seekers found themselves on a journey of self-discovery and introspection. Seekers exhibited behaviors in alignment with a search for authenticity. As described in Mainero and Sullivan's (2005) career model, the Seekers were drawn to their need for authenticity strived to align their behaviors and attitudes with personal values.

All of the Seekers were certified coaches and showed behaviors linked to authentically empowering and supporting others in their development. This is akin to a study by Sims & Morris (2018), which found that female business owners in a service business displayed strong authenticity orientation.

As coaches, Seekers were knowledgeable of learning modalities. In particular, all of them had additional certifications in behavioral assessments such as the Hogan Personality Test, the Leadership Circle, and Neuro-Linguistic Programming. These assessments were administered to clients and likely resulted in the Seekers having a heightened sensibility and awareness of their

own identity, as well as drivers of other individuals. The Seekers appeared more self-directed and exhibit behaviors as continuous learners.

The majority of Seekers, unlike the Go-Getters, were drawn to seeking a life purpose or calling, possibly because they had spent considerable time engaged in self-reflection. In a study on female business owners, Sims (2018) noted that the women “expressed that they were called to enact their businesses based on either their personal vision or direction from a higher power” (p. 15). Schein (1996) describes this career anchor as a *service or dedication to a cause* where individuals are drawn to making meaningful change. This notion is further reflected through the research of Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), which found that individuals who viewed their work as a calling reported a higher level of personal fulfillment.

Moreover, Sydney and Magdalena, both Seekers, mentioned the phenomenon of corporate culture burnout, which disproportionately affects women. Likewise, Biele (2016) posited that women in search of authenticity were often overwhelmed and burned out and the journey to authenticity afforded them better health. Thus, a desire for better health may account for the Seekers having rated self-care as highly important in their transition process. In contrast, the Go-Getters made no reference to wellbeing as being an integral part of their transition strategy.

### ***The Explorers***

“I sustain myself with the love of a family,” Maya Angelou, American poet and civil rights activist.

Mainero (2007) noted that in making career decisions, women took into consideration the impact of their decision on their family as well as their immediate network. The Explorers followed a similar pattern. Most of the Explorers were primarily focused on achieving balance and juggling life, family, and work demands. This is akin to Schein’s (1996) lifestyle career

anchor where women in dual careers juggle multiple aspects of work and home life. The literature intimates that career women have a high career-family conflict because they want to simultaneously be successful in the roles of parent and professional (Wallace, 2001, Greenhaus et al., 1997). The researcher suggests the reason for this may be that they sought to be good role models for their children.

Given the complexity of their lives, these women held multiple versions of their identity and so their primary need was to, as Mainero and Sullivan (2005) state, “create a healthy equilibrium among work, relationships, and caregiving roles” (p. 6). The Explorers demonstrated that balance was an important component in the need for personal fulfillment. Research by Rosenthal, Wanat & Samimi (2020) on *Striving for Balance*, found that although having gained autonomy and personal fulfillment, women reported feelings of “guilt, frustration, and exhaustion as they struggle to be a good doctor, partner, mother, family member, and friend” (p. 43). The 2014 New York Times article by Miller and Alderman raises a similar observation, as for many mothers, choosing the type of work involves having to weigh benefits and drawbacks, often linked to the childcare availability during child-rearing years.

Furthermore, the Explorers spoke of wanting freedom and flexibility and not being tethered to their work. This is akin to a study by Duberley and Carrigan (2013), where women cited their desire for flexibility and autonomy as motivating factors, as well as an opportunity to not be seen as ‘just a housewife.’

In sum, the Explorers’ personal visions were not as bold as the Seekers or the Go-Getters. The researcher interprets this to mean that they may have higher levels of responsibility to their family as compared to the Go-Getters and Seekers. They were focused on balance akin to



Mainero's (2005) observation, which underscored that people are motivated more by self-fulfillment and work-life balance than the steadiness and security of the past.

### **Analytic Category 2: Women Overcome Challenges in Informal Ways and By Having a Supportive Community**

The Go-Getters, who were adventurers, were resourceful and consequently, made use of their work relations and circles of influence. Because of their strong networks and business connections, they leveraged their networks of peers and experts as sources of ideas, advice, and brainstorming. In this manner, they benefited from being in dialogue with others and were able to expand their connections. These connections provided opportunities to meet trusted mentors who would guide them in fulfilling their vision.

The Seekers, who were coaches on a journey of self-discovery, actively reached out to their networks for counseling, advice, and inspiration. Because of their curiosity and interest in "finding themselves," Seekers learned on their own, primarily through self-reflection. In searching for authenticity, they drew on past experiences to understand and learn what to incorporate in their lives, both the successes and the failures. In their continual quest to understand themselves, they reached out to others through dialogue.

The Explorers, because of their family commitments, innately understood the value of having extended support from others outside their family. This is akin to research by Van Oosten et al. (2017) who observed that "women who persist understand themselves and what they want from life, nurture supportive relationships personally and professionally" (p. 2).

Since most women in this group were working mothers, they sought out other parents with whom they could explore ways to achieve balance in life. In this way, the Explorers, like the Seekers, benefited from fostering dialogue with others and in their support groups. Research by Norman, Aiken, and Greer (2021) lends support to this finding, as they found that women

transitioning to entrepreneurship discovered that persistence, motivation, and a strong support system, reinforced their success.

In reviewing the demographic inventory, the researcher found no discernable factors emanating from the participants that would explain any of the findings.

In addition, the researcher reviewed participant CVs, LinkedIn, and other social media accounts to discern whether there were other factors to be considered. The documents were weaved in as supplemental information. They corroborated the participant's lived experiences as expressed during interview.

### **Summary of Interpretation**

All the women in this study exhibit the characteristics that Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) identify as a personal vision. In addition, the women had three distinct decisional approaches to the pursuit of their personal vision which, illustrated by their behavioral tendencies, aligned with Hakim's (2000) "Preference Theory." The Seekers and Go-Getters were work-centered, with a focus on employment, while the Explorers were adaptive and focused on flexibility and balance.

The women learned to overcome their challenges in informal ways and by having a supportive community. The researcher observed that Schlossberg's (1981) 4S Transition Framework offers an effective way to view their transition process. The 4S model depicts four potential resources *Self, Support, Situation, and Strategies*, available to women embarking on a transition process. These resources influence an individual's ability to cope with change amid a transition. While all the participants experienced the four elements within the 4S framework, the researcher noted that each group focused primarily on one of the four S's.

As high achieving businesswomen, the Go-Getters, were primarily focused on the resource of strategies to support them during their transition. All of the women had an

international career and were well connected. Consequently, they had a strong professional network to rely on. As women with relatively high self-efficacy, they had solid coping strategies, business strategies and systematic ways of addressing issues they encountered on their journey.

In comparison, the Seekers were primarily focused on the resource of self and most of them spent time reflecting on their personal values, which served as a compass for their personal journey. In transitions, an important element is to make meaning of the transition. Several Seekers found this time to be a time of awakening and a quest for meaning, which is often associated with spirituality (Anderson, Goodman, Schlossberg, 2011).

The Explorers were the largest group with the most children. Their situation in alignment with the 4S framework was the factor of influence in that they did not have as much flexibility. Consequently, they transitioned to their desired reality having to take into consideration the strong influence and pull of family dynamics and other priorities. They were likely the group most impacted by timing and control, as raising a family did not grant the flexibility afforded to the Go-Getters and the Seekers without children.

All of the women who pursued a personal vision were ultimately drawn to becoming entrepreneurs where they could realize their dreams on their terms, not within the confines of an organization. In a study of female entrepreneurship, McGowan et al. (2012) found that "...all the women pointed to a greater sense of well-being, personal fulfilment and satisfaction and joy in their various accomplishments in running their own venture."

The women's desire to pursue personal fulfilment is similarly identified in Biele's (2006) research *Opting in: Women's search for wellbeing*, where the women were focused on a search for authenticity, a search for coherence, a desire to have more power and control over their lives, as well as the ability to focus on what felt important to them, be those nurturing relationships with those close to them or doing fulfilling and meaningful work (p.507).

Akin to Ryan et al. (2008)'s model of eudaimonia, the women in the study portrayed the characteristics of "eudaimonic living" illustrated in four ways in that they pursued intrinsic goals; were self-directed in their approach; acted with an understanding of the impact of their choices and exhibited behaviors that satisfied competence, relatedness and autonomy (p. 139).

The virtual focus group, though displaying similar behaviors to the interviewees, were unable to transition to their desired reality. The researcher interprets that they have strong security/stability anchors (Schein, 1996). These values make them reluctant to give up their current circumstance as their security need is stronger than their motivation to act on their vision.

### **Contributions to the Literature**

The current study has made five contributions to the literature.

The first contribution expanded upon the research of Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006), which proposed that the ideal self is a driver for intentional change. This was found to be the case for the women in the study. The Go-Getters, Seekers, and Explorers all exhibited core elements of the ideal self, namely, an image of a desired future, hope, and core identity that motivated them to act on their personal vision and transition to their desired reality.

The second contribution is that the study reinforces the notion that women are relational and arrange their lives in tandem with their work and personal experiences. Similar to a kaleidoscope, women's careers are constantly in flux and rotate between authenticity, balance, and challenge, prompting women to seek a particular aspect at certain junctures in their lives in search for fulfillment (Mainero & Sullivan 2005).

The third contribution reinforced the notion that mentoring provides greater career satisfaction (Wallace 2001). In particular, male mentors can have an important role to play in

supporting women's career and life aspirations. The Explorers and Seekers made use of mentors and found them to be invaluable during their transition process.

The fourth contribution is that women's communities provide an effective support system and one that women particularly rely on during phases of professional and personal transition. Communities can provide an array of emotional support, practical and tactical solutions as well as provide a space for networking. All the women engaged with their respective communities of support.

The fifth contribution to the literature illuminates upon the notion that women who follow through on their personal vision, dreams and aspirations experience subjective well-being. Equipped with resources, community support and networks, these women were able to turn their dream to reality and achieve personal fulfilment.

The research should be of interest to coaches, HR practitioners, and women's communities.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore with a group of 24 women, how they came to pursue their personal vision and transition to what was for them a new desired reality. The researcher sought to shed light on the phenomenon where women with a personal vision leave an established situation to transition to their desired reality. The researcher uncovered information and data related to how women identified their personal vision, what methods and ways they used to reach their desired reality, what they learned along the way, and other factors that helped or hindered them during the transition process. The study yielded findings that shed light on how these women were able to transition to the reality they envisioned for themselves.

### Conclusions

The researcher drew four conclusions from the findings of this modified case study.

#### Conclusion 1:

**Women need to be motivated in order to achieve personal fulfillment.** The researcher concludes that the women in this study were motivated by their high self-efficacy beliefs, a component of the ideal self, the driver for change that motivated them to pursue their personal vision thereby achieving fulfillment. The identification of three groups, the Go-Getters, the Seekers, and the Explorers demonstrated that women identify fulfillment in unique ways dictated by their individual and personal life experiences. Their high level of self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and identity allowed them to explore their desired reality. The women followed through on their personal values that formed their core identity and influenced their personal aspirations. In this manner, they were equipped with drive and a dream that was within their reach.

### **Conclusion 2:**

**Personal issues must be reconciled before women can begin their transition from an established situation to their desired reality.** The researcher concludes that women need to identify, address, and acknowledge any personal or emotional issues prior to considering a transition. Women in this study took great care to understand and recognize the personal and emotional issues that surfaced as they embarked on their career and life transition. They dialogued with trusted friends, colleagues, peers, and business professionals. Additionally, they proactively took advantage of opportunities to seek support and help when faced with these emotional and personal challenges. Lastly, the women were motivated and unafraid to ask for help in support of their envisioned reality.

### **Conclusion 3:**

**Informal learning methods are key in helping women through their transition process.** The researcher concludes that learning occurred primarily through informal methods, all of which were instrumental in helping these women transition to their desired reality. They were able to draw on their past experience and engage in active reflection. Self-reflection builds confidence and dialoguing with others as well as exploration through lived experiences were the ways by which these women learned.

Role models in particular offered an additional learning avenue. While some women learned through formal training, these formal options proved to be insufficient for the learning that was needed to transition with success.

### **Conclusion 4:**

**Transitioning to a desired reality is unlikely without support from others.** The researcher concludes that a supportive community and/or a supportive family are key components to transitioning with success. The women in the study unanimously spoke of

building and relying on their network, of seeking help in the form of mentors, friends, family, and of leveraging connections and building relations with supportive individuals or communities which were critical to their success.

The women relied on a supportive community and/or supportive family to process and reflect on their experiences. This community included supporters and advocates. As women tend to operate relationally, the women's ability to pursue their personal aspirations was intertwined with their support circle and network of acquaintances. The women could not have achieved their ambitions were it not for the community of support they were able to tap into along their journey to their desired reality.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The researcher offers three sets of recommendations for women contemplating pursuing a personal vision. In addition, the researcher offers three sets of recommendations for professional coaches who support women in career and life transitions. The researcher also offers three recommendations for women's organizations such as women's interest groups and networks seeking to support and empower women on their quest for personal and professional fulfillment.

#### **Recommendations for Women Seeking to Pursue Their Personal Vision**

First, women seeking to transition to their desired reality need to be intrinsically motivated and recognize that formulating, articulating, and clearly visualizing an ideal self is an effective approach to identifying a personal vision. Identifying their ideal self while also understanding their current self helps to uncover the learning path to attaining a desired outcome. Understanding one's personal values through self-assessments or through the support of a professional coach, advisor, or mentor would help with solidifying an individual's identity and sense of self.



Second, women should proactively reach out, identify, and join a community of support for their journey and engage in different circles of dialogue. There should be engagement with friends and family, as well as with peers, professionals, and experts in the business, sources who are deemed trustworthy. With the advent of remote communities, the possibilities have expanded greatly and for women seeking to explore opportunities that previously seemed unattainable, the array of online tools have facilitated the ability to expand women's connections.

Third, women should consider putting together a plan of action that includes a business plan, an exit strategy and a holistic view of tackling the transition process through the lens of Schlossberg's 4S model.

### **Recommendations for Coaches and Professionals**

Coaches and professionals supporting women in career and life transition should explore using career transition frameworks as models that support and facilitate women's exploration of their personal vision and address future visioning. Such models examine values, skills, and desires. The use of evidence-based models such as Boyatzis' Intentional Change Theory model (2006) offers the opportunity for women to follow a path that allows them to explore and gain clarity on what is needed to move toward their desired reality. The learning agenda should include an execution strategy as well as identifying a support network.

In coaching sessions, coaches can benefit from focusing on the positive effects of visualization. Moving towards a desired reality for a coaching client involves optimism, hope, and efficacy. Coaches should support women in creating a personal vision based on their ideal selves so that they can freely imagine their desired lifestyle. Coaches should incorporate visualization exercises to help women solidify their personal vision.

Coaches should also address emotional setbacks such as Impostor Syndrome and other personal issues that women face through the use of self-assessment tools.

## **Recommendations for Women's Interest Groups and Networks**

Given that all women experienced community and/or family support as an integral factor of their success in transitioning to their desired reality, the researcher recommends that women's organizations, women's networks and interest groups offer multiple formats of support.

Online communities offer women the opportunity to engage with others globally in a flexible manner. Creating support networks for women based on their needs and skills would allow them to exchange and converse with other women in different sectors and gain knowledge from each other's lived experiences.

Women's networks should incorporate a mentoring or coaching program to build support and engagement in the community and offer women the opportunity to learn from experienced professionals. They should also incorporate holistic offerings that include business and financial support and mental wellness component for women to address the emotional and personal issues that working women face.

Applying these recommendations would add to the literature and provide new insights into this phenomenon of women successfully transitioning to their desired reality.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The experience of 24 women who transitioned to their desired reality was shared in this research. Based on the small sample of the study, the researcher recommends surveying a larger population for additional data on the motivators and approaches used in identifying and pursuing a personal vision. It would be interesting to note whether this holds true for a wider range of women. Additional areas that would be worth exploring are data based on different cultures as well as a broader socio-economic group. It is also recommended that further research be done to test the three behavioral categorizations with other groups of women to uncover whether these tendencies are applicable to a larger population.

More research is warranted to explore how some women with a personal vision transition to their desired reality. Further information is needed to understand the extent of the differences in pursuing a personal vision as it relates to gender. In addition, there is minimal research on the study of fulfillment and well-being in women, thus, it would be worth expanding on that literature. Further research on the benefits of intrinsic motivation as it relates to the pursuit of personal fulfillment in women should be explored.

The research sought to uncover how some women managed to successfully transition to their desired reality. Expanding the study to include a broader population and exploring the suggested studies would build upon this body of research.

### **Revisiting Assumptions**

Upon embarking on this research problem, the researcher had five assumptions linked to this study. The following presents an overview of each of the assumptions in view of the findings that were presented in Chapter IV, as well as the analysis from this current chapter.

The first assumption was that equipped with a fuller sense of self, women may be better prepared to pursue a personal vision. This assumption held true given the findings that demonstrated that women had identified an ideal self, comprised of hope, core identity, and an image of a desired future of their ideal self that manifested as a personal vision.

The second assumption was that women who follow through on their personal vision lead a more fulfilled life. This assumption was correct as was noted in the findings where women expressly stated feeling more fulfilled and having a greater sense of wellbeing as a result of having transitioned to their desired reality.

The third assumption was that women are hindered by their gender in realizing their dreams. This assumption did not hold true given the fact that the women made no reference to gender discrimination as a hindering factor with respect to their personal ambitions.

The fourth assumption was that those women pursuing their personal vision were “subjectivists in their thinking.” The researcher found that this did not hold true. While some women, particularly the Seekers, spent time in self-discovery, what Gilligan et al. (1986) call *inward* listening, the women did not exhibit the other characteristics associated with subjectivists. They were neither disadvantaged by their environmental factors nor did they speak of having to redefine authority.

The fifth assumption was that external and internal factors impact personal vision, which in turn impact personal and professional fulfillment. This assumption holds true and was illustrated in Finding 4, which revealed that a number of destabilizing factors, such as unsupportive work environments, financial strain, and personal demands hindered participants’ ability to find personal and professional fulfillment.

## **Researcher Reflections**

The researcher set out to explore ways of supporting women in transitioning to their personal and professional dreams and ambitions. The researcher could not have imagined the journey she was about to embark on as she delved into the research. She had never considered writing a doctorate and the doctoral journey was somewhat akin to running a marathon, it was a slow, exhausting and often unsteady pace, it was incredibly challenging and, on many occasions, she lost her way. Yet, the women's incredible stories kept the researcher motivated. She learned of resilience, faith, and hope. She learned the meaning of support and of curiosity, she learned to push through to the finish line.

The research journey has been the author's greatest teacher. She learned and continues to uncover so much of what is still to be told. As she listened to the stories of these extraordinary women, she related it to her own observations and lived experiences. She lived through their shared experiences and in doing so, was able to give them a voice and a platform to share their extraordinary and inspiring stories of who they are becoming.

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## APPENDIX A

### Participant Informed Consent

Teachers College, Columbia University  
525 West 120<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York NY 10027  
212 678 3000  
[www.tc.edu](http://www.tc.edu)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH: You are invited to participate in a research study about how women with a personal vision transitioned to their desired reality. For this study, the term professional women refers to women who have, at minimum a college degree. The research will be conducted by Ms. Helen Krug von Nidda, a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Your selection for this study is based on the following three criteria:

1. You have been identified as an ideal participant.
2. You are a professional woman.
3. You are living your personal vision.

You will be asked to share your experience about the transition as well as any lessons learned from your experiences.

If you agree, the interview will be audio-taped to allow the researcher a more accurate reflection of your views. The study will take place at a mutually agreeable time and place, via electronic platform, in a setting that provides privacy.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: Potentially, the risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and only carry the same amount of risk that participants will encounter during the interview. However, your participation in this study may allow you to experience the intrinsic benefits of (1) sharing your professional work experiences and (2) helping others understand the factors the support and hinder the pursuit of transitioning to a personal vision of choice.

PAYMENTS: There will be no payment for your participation. For your participation, you will receive feedback about this study in the form of a brief summary of the dissertation's findings.

DATA STORAGE TO PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY: The taped interviews, transcriptions and written materials will be held in confidence, and kept in a secure and locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Only the researcher will have access to the materials. Data files on the researcher's computer will be password protected. Moreover, the participants name will be substituted with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

HOW WILL RESULTS BE USED: The results of the study will be published as a dissertation, which is a partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and / or educational publication(s).

## APPENDIX B

### Participants' Rights

Teachers College, Columbia University  
525 West 120<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York NY 10027 212 678 3000  
[www.tc.edu](http://www.tc.edu)

#### PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

Principal Investigator: Helen Krug von Nidda

Research Title: Vision Accomplished: A Study Of Women Living Their Personal Vision

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to future medical care, employment, student status or other entitlements.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his/her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, who will answer my questions. The investigator's phone number is (212 365 8216)
- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Teachers College, Columbia University Institutional Review Board /IRB. The phone number for the IRB is (212) 678-4105. Or, I can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY, 10027, Box 151.
- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.
- Audio taping is part of this research. The written and audio taped materials will be viewed only by the principal investigator and members of the research team. Please check one below:
  - ( ) I consent to be audio taped.
  - ( ) I do NOT consent to being audio taped.

- Written, and/or audio taped materials

( ) may be viewed in an educational setting outside the research

( ) may NOT be viewed in an educational setting outside the research.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Investigator's Verification of Explanation

I, Helen Krug von Nidda, certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name).

She has had the opportunity to discuss it with me in detail. I have answered all his/her questions and s/he provided the affirmative agreement (i.e. assent) to participate in this research.

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### Participant Demographic Inventory

This questionnaire asks specific questions about relative to your professional work experiences, career aspirations, demographics (e.g., age, education, gender, race/ethnicity) and your line of work. The information collected from this inventory is completely confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this research study.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Current Title \_\_\_\_\_  
Location \_\_\_\_\_  
Company /Organization \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you lived your personal vision?

- Less than 1 year
- 18 months to less than three years
- 3 years to less than 5 years
- 5 years to less than 7 years
- 7 years to less than 10 years
- 10 years or more

What is your area of work?

What is current role?

What is your desired role?

How many years have you worked in this area?

- 6 months to less than a year
- 1 year to less than 3 years

- 3 years to less than 5 years
- 5 years to less than 7 years
- 7 years to less than 10 years
- 10 years or more

How many years of total professional work experience do you have?

- Five years or less
- Less than 10 years
- 10-15 years
- 15-20 years
- 20 or more years

Age

- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-50
- 51-54
- 55+

What is your Relationship Status?

- Single/Not Married
- Married
- Divorced
- In a long-term Relationship/Not Married

Children/dependents and ages (please list)

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- College/University graduate (e.g., BA, BS, AB)
- Master's Degree (e.g., MA, MS, MBA, MPA)
- Doctorate, Law or Medical Degree (e.g., EdD, PhD, MD, JD)
- Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your Race/Ethnicity? (Select all the apply)

- African American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Asian American
- Black (non-American)
- Hispanic/Latino American (non-black)
- Hispanic/Latino (non-American)
- Multi-racial/multi-ethnic
- White/Caucasian
- Prefer not to respond

Is English your native language? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

If no, please indicate your native language \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

Participant Demographic Inventory Table

<b>Participant Title</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Total years worked</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Aamori Founder	USA	10-15 years	45-50	Married	Yes	College/University graduate	African American
Agatha Executive Coach	Italy	21 or more years	45-50	Married	Yes	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Akira Co-Founder, CEO Fertility WorldWide	USA	10-15 years	35-44	Divorced	No	Master's Degree	African American
Arlette None	USA	21 or more years	51-54	Married	Yes	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Belinda CEO	USA	21 or more years	45-50	Married	No	College/University graduate	White/Caucasian
Charlotte CEO & Founder	USA	10-15 years	35-44	Married	Yes	Doctorate Law or Medical Degree	White/Caucasian
Chloe CEO & Founder	USA	21 or more years	45-50	In a partnership	No	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Claritta Owner	Bahamas	21 or more years	51-54	Single	No	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Dahab Client Solutions Manager	Netherlands	More than 5 years but less than 10 years	35-44	Single	No	Master's Degree	Moroccan
Edina Executive Director	Nigeria	16-20 years	45-50	Single	Yes	Doctorate Law or Medical Degree	other - African
Ekatarina Co-CEO	Switzerland	21 or more years	45-50	Married	Yes	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Kristina Legal Campaigns Director	USA	10-15 years	35-44	Married	No	Doctorate Law or Medical Degree	White/Caucasian
Linda Director, Special Education	USA	21 or more years	51-54	Married	Yes	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Magdalena Cohort Director	Switzerland	16-20 years	35-44	Married	No	Master's Degree	Hispanic/Latino (non-American)
Mandy Owner	USA	21 or more years	51-54	Married	No	College/University graduate	White/Caucasian
Nora Co-Founder	USA	21 or more years	55+	Married	Yes	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Penelope Principal	Germany	21 or more years	35-44	Married	Yes	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Reka Senior Officer	USA	21 or more years	45-50	Married	Yes	Doctorate Law or Medical Degree	African American
Rose Co-Founder & Executive Director	USA	16-20 years	45-50	Married	Yes	College/University graduate	White/Caucasian

<b>Participant Title</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Total years worked</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Saanvi Forum Lead	Switzerland	10-15 years	35-44	Married	Yes	Master's Degree	Multi-racial/ multi-ethnic
Salome Founder	USA	16-20 years	35-44	Married	No	Master's Degree	White/Caucasian
Sharon Owner	USA	21 or more years	51-54	Single	No	College/University graduate	White/Caucasian
Sydney Executive Coach	USA	21 or more years	55+	Married	No	College/University graduate	White/Caucasian
Yumi President, Co- Founder	USA	21 or more years	35-44	Married	Yes	Doctoral candidate	Asian



## **APPENDIX E**

### Participant Interview Protocol

#### **RQ1. How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?**

##### Background & Introductory Questions

1. Please describe how you identified a personal vision?
2. What experience(s) or event(s) led to your personal vision?
3. Please share a specific event or experience, if any, that triggered your decision to act on your vision?
4. What was your primary reasons or motivation for acting on your personal vision?

#### **RQ2: What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?**

1. What challenges did you encounter as you made the transition to achieve your goal?
2. Which one was the hardest to overcome?
3. What were your concerns or reservations?
4. Once you decided to make the transition, what action(s) did you take?

#### **RQ3: How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they face?**

1. How did you learn to overcome the challenges you faced?
2. What were major sources of frustration?
3. What were major sources of information or help?
4. What were the things you had to learn about during this transition process?

**RQ4: What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?**

1. Describe your previous environment. How did it help or hinder you on your career transition?
2. What other factors helped or hindered you in transitioning to your desired reality?
3. What else, if anything, did you learn about yourself through the experience of transitioning to your desired reality?
4. What insight, awareness or realizations (if any) did you come to? How (if at all) were these insights different from your previous perspectives?

## APPENDIX F

### Coding Scheme

Question	Factor	Code	Descriptor
<b>RQ1 How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?</b>			
Motivation	Extrinsic	AOV	Encouraged to act on my vision
		FIN	Wanting financial independence
		OCO	To prepare for other career opportunities
		TRE	Experiencing a transformative event
Motivation	Intrinsic	CHD	A childhood dream
		DHO	A desire to help others
		DLS	Seeking a different lifestyle
		FLX	More flexibility and independence
		GBF	Guided by my faith
		PFU	Personal fulfilment
		RIJ	To right an injustice
<b>RQ2 What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?</b>			
Challenges	External	DIS	Discrimination
		LAR	Lacking resources
		NWE	Adapting to a new work environment
		PRE	Pressure from / unsupported by others
Challenges	Internal	BLF	Balancing family life and values
		FEA	Fear of the unknown
		ITS	Identifying transferable skills / building knowledge
		LPE	Lacking a plan of execution / Implementing the vision
		PEI	Personal issues
<b>RQ3 How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they faced in order to pursue their vision?</b>			
Learning	Formal	CCT	Attending courses, coaching, training
	Informal	DWO	Dialoguing with others
		LFE	Learning from experience
		MRM	Mentoring and role models
		SER	Through self reflection
<b>RQ4 What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?</b>			
Other Factors	Helped	BIS	Belief in self
		EXS	Having an execution strategy
		FIS	Having financial security
		PWE	Prior work experience
		SCF	A supportive community / a supportive family
		SCP	Self-care practices
Other Factors	Hindered	SFA	Spiritual Faith
		EWR	Leaving established work relationships
		FINS	Financial strain
		OWD	Overwhelming work/personal demands
		SED	Self-doubt
		UWE	Unsupportive / unpleasant work environment

## APPENDIX G

### Learning/Virtual Focus Group Protocol

Using Zoom, a virtual online platform for conducting group discussions, the virtual group will discuss their experience on the topic- *Factors Impacting Career Transition*

**Opening Instructions:** After the welcome and introductions lasting approximately 10 minutes, the group will be asked to share their experiences on two questions. The first question is outlined below. This discussion will last approximately 20 minutes.

1. Thinking back over your career, what helped you to advance? Please share your experiences.

The next question below will be posed and will last approximately 20 minutes.

2. What has hindered you from making a transition, specifically, what are the challenges you've encountered in advancing towards your personal vision?

**Final Instructions:** After approximately 55 minutes, the moderator will thank the group for their participation and time. Participants will be instructed to leave group and the session will be closed.

## APPENDIX H

### Guidelines for Learning/Virtual Focus Group

#### PARTICIPATION

- The learning/virtual discussion group will begin promptly at {time} and last 60 minutes. You will receive a zoom link and password to enter the virtual room.
- In consideration of everyone's time, participants joining 10 minutes past the hour will not be admitted to the session.
- To keep confidentiality and anonymity, please do not share contact information with others during the learning/virtual discussion group.
- Do not share the content shared within this virtual group with others outside of the learning/virtual discussion group.
- Make sure to follow on-screen directions. If you have any questions or concerns during the learning/virtual discussion group, please contact me using the chat function.

#### **Learning/Virtual Discussion Group Instructions:**

1. Approximately 2 weeks prior to the scheduled virtual group, you will be sent a calendar invitation with a zoom link and password to enter the virtual group. Make sure you are connected to a stable secure Wi-Fi/ internet connection.
2. You will enter the virtual group, and I will ask you to introduce yourself to the group.
3. If you need to communicate privately with the me, use the chat function on the screen.
4. The moderator will allow a short 10 minutes for introductions. After introductions, the first of two questions will be posed to the virtual group for sharing and discussion around their learning experiences as diverse women who have transitioned to their desired reality

- Agree or disagree respectfully with someone, and state why you see this similarly or differently.
  - Ask a question of a response for clarification or perhaps to ask why they chose that particular response to share.
  - Share additional ideas that come to mind as a reply to other responses or as a reply to your own.
5. After 20 minutes, the second question will be posted, following the same guides. Discussion focused towards the related question is encouraged to continue until the moderator shares the next question.
6. Once the moderator has informed you that the virtual group has come to an end, please click on “leave group”.

Thank you so much for your time, your contributions to this research are highly appreciated.

## APPENDIX I

### Learning/Virtual Focus Group Informed Consent

Teachers College, Columbia University  
525 West 120<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York NY 10027  
212 678 3000  
[www.tc.edu](http://www.tc.edu)

**DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH:** You are invited to participate in a research study that focuses how women with a personal vision transition to their desired reality. As part of the study, you are being invited to participate in learning/virtual discussion group. Ms. Helen Krug von Nidda, a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, will conduct the research.

**LEARNING/VIRTUAL DISCUSSION GROUP PARTICIPATION:** The learning/virtual discussion group will be conducted online through the use of Zoom, an online meeting platform, at a mutually agreeable time for a group of 4-6 participants. Through this private online platform, the researcher can schedule and conduct a password protected online learning/virtual discussion group for a group of participants in a live synchronous format with text-based interaction, similar to an online chat room. As a participant you can choose to provide your first name or initials to the other participants or maintain confidentiality in the group by selecting a professional alias or screen name.

You will be asked to share your professional work experiences, including, factors impacting your career experience. In addition, lessons that you have learned from your experiences. The researcher will utilize the learning/virtual discussion group transcript as another means of analyzing the data on behalf of the study. The transcript will not be used for anything other than this purpose. Specific instructions on how to participate in the online group will be sent to you separately along with the scheduled time.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** Potentially, the risks associated with participating in this study are minimal and only carry the same amount of risk that participants will encounter during the interview. However, your participation in this study may allow you to experience the intrinsic benefits of (1) sharing your professional work experiences and (2) helping others understand the factors the support and hinder the career transition process of professional women.

**PAYMENTS:** There will be no payment for your participation. For your participation, you will receive feedback about this study in the form of a brief summary of the dissertation's findings.

**DATA STORAGE TO PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY:** The learning/virtual discussion group transcript will be maintained in a secure location along with the other data gathered for this study. Transcriptions and written materials will be held in confidence, and kept

in a secure and locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Only the researcher will have access to the materials. Data files on the researcher's computer will be password protected. Moreover, the participants will be substituted with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

HOW WILL RESULTS BE USED: The results of the study will be published as a dissertation, which is a partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and / or educational publication(s).



## APPENDIX J

### Learning/Virtual Focus Group Participants' Rights

Teachers College, Columbia University  
525 West 120<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York NY 10027  
212 678 3000  
[www.tc.edu](http://www.tc.edu)

Principal Investigator: Helen Krug von Nidda

Research Title: Vision Accomplished: A study of women living their personal vision

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his/her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, who will answer my questions. The investigator's phone number is 212.365.8216.
- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Teachers College, Columbia University Institutional Review Board /IRB. The phone number for the IRB is (212) 678-4105. Or, I can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY, 10027, Box 151.
- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Verification of Explanation

I, Helen Krug von Nidda, certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name). S/he has had the opportunity to discuss it with me in detail. I have answered all his/her questions and s/he provided the affirmative agreement (i.e. assent) to participate in this research.

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX K

### Letter to Potential Participants

Date

Dear {Potential Participants}:

This letter is to invite you to participate in an exploratory case study that seeks to examine how women with a personal vision transition to their desired new reality.

This research study will constitute a partial fulfillment for a degree of Doctor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. However, your contribution will be greatly appreciated, as the benefit of your participation. Your professional work experiences will contribute to supporting practitioners, researchers and women who seek to understand how to successfully pursue a personal vision and transition to a desired reality.

Should you consider partaking in this study, the following briefly outlines the process:

- Interviews will be conducted over the phone or agreed location at a mutually agreed time.
- Participation time is roughly sixty (60) minutes.
- If you agree, the interview will be audio-taped to allow the researcher a more accurate reflection of your views.
- Please note that your name and/or any other identifiers will be omitted from the report to preserve confidentiality.

Furthermore, upon your request the researcher will provide you with a hardcopy of the interview for your review.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at telephone number (212 365 8216)

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

Helen Krug von Nidda  
Doctoral Candidate  
Teachers College, Columbia University

## APPENDIX L

### Letter to Potential Learning/Virtual Focus Group Participants

Date

Dear {Potential Participants}:

This letter is to invite you to participate in an exploratory case study that seeks to examine how women with a personal vision transition to their desired new reality.

This research study will constitute a partial fulfillment for a degree of Doctor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. However, your contribution will be greatly appreciated, as the benefit of your participation. Your professional work experiences will contribute to the understanding and hopefully the guidance of organizations in developing leadership pipeline of diverse women managers. Should you consider partaking in this study, the following briefly outlines the process:

- Sign a consent form agreeing to the terms and conditions of the study.
- Participate in a private online learning/virtual discussion group for approximately 60 minutes

Learning/virtual discussion group guidelines and specific instructions on how to participate along with the time will be supplied to you separately. Transcript from the learning/virtual discussion group will be utilized as another means of analyzing the data on behalf of the study. Please note that your name and/or any other identifiers will be omitted from the study report to preserve confidentiality.

For your participation, you will be provided with a summary of the research findings.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at telephone number 212 365 8216.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

---

Helen Krug von Nidda  
Doctoral Candidate  
Teachers College, Columbia University

## APPENDIX M

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

#### **Motivation - Personal vision and transition to their desired reality**

##### *Intrinsic*

- A desire for Balance
- A higher interest in self care
- Personal fulfilment
- Self-efficacy
- An aspiration for an improved lifestyle
- A wish for more flexibility
- Better quality of life

##### *Extrinsic*

- A search for financial security
- To escape harassment
- To leave a low support environment

#### **How women learn to transition**

##### *Through formal learning, e.g.*

- Attending courses
- Pursuing academic degrees

##### *Through informal learning*

- Self-directed
- Mentoring
- Coaching
- Networking with professionals, meet ups or other support groups
- Learning from Experience
- Through relationships
- Reflection
- Transformative learning

#### **Challenges for women seeking to transition to a desired new reality**

##### *External*

- Gender discrimination
- Stereotypes
- Internal challenges
- Location
- Lack of opportunity
- Socioeconomic system

*Internal*

Self-limiting beliefs  
Lack of knowledge  
Lack of networking, support system

**Additional factors that hindered women's transition to a desired reality**

*Hindered*

Second generation bias  
Care giving  
Second shifts  
Self-doubt  
Relationship stress

*Helped*

Ambition  
Shared vision  
Work engagement  
Relationships  
Timing  
Happenstance  
Agency

## APPENDIX N

### FREQUENCY TABLE – FINDING #1

RQ1: How do participants describe what led them to act on their personal vision?

n=24

Participant	Intrinsic Motivation							Extrinsic Motivation			
	Personal fulfillment	A desire to help others	Seeking a different lifestyle	More flexibility and independence	To right an injustice	A childhood dream	Guided by my faith	Experiencing a transformative event	To prepare for other career opportunities	Encouraged to act on my vision	Wanting financial independence
Aamori	X		X	X		X		X	X		X
Agatha	X	X						X			
Akira	X					X			X		
Arlette	X								X		
Belinda	X		X	X				X	X		
Charlotte	X			X				X	X		
Chloe	X	X						X	X	X	
Claritta	X		X	X				X		X	
Dahab	X	X	X					X	X		
Edina	X	X			X	X	X	X			
Ekatarina	X							X		X	
Kristina			X		X	X			X		
Linda	X	X				X		X		X	
Magdalena	X	X				X		X			
Mandy	X	X	X	X		X			X		X
Nora		X		X				X			
Penelope	X	X		X	X			X			
Reka	X	X	X	X							X
Rose		X			X			X	X		
Saanvi	X	X	X	X						X	
Salome	X							X	X		
Sharon		X					X	X			
Sydney	X		X					X	X		
Yumi		X	X	X				X	X		
Total	19	14	10	10	4	7	2	18	13	5	3
%	79%	58%	42%	42%	17%	29%	8%	75%	54%	21%	13%

## APPENDIX O

### FREQUENCY TABLE – FINDING #2

RQ2: What challenges do participants say they encountered as they considered making a transition in order to achieve their personal goal?

n=24

Participant	Internal Challenges					External Challenges			
	Personal issues	Lacking a plan of execution / Implementing the vision	Fear of the unknown	Identifying transferable skills / building knowledge	Balancing family life and values	Pressure from / unsupported by others	Lacking resources	Discrimination	Adapting to a new work environment
Aamori	X	X	X	X	X		X		
Agatha	X	X	X	X			X		
Akira	X					X			
Arlette	X	X					X		X
Belinda	X	X							
Charlotte	X	X	X	X	X				
Chloe	X	X		X			X		
Claritta		X				X			
Dahab	X	X	X		X	X			
Edina		X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Ekatarina	X	X	X				X		
Kristina	X								
Linda	X					X			
Magdalena	X	X	X	X		X		X	
Mandy		X		X		X			
Nora	X		X						
Penelope	X	X				X			
Reka	X								
Rose	X						X	X	
Saanvi	X	X	X						
Salome		X			X	X	X		
Sharon	X		X						
Sydney	X	X	X	X		X			
Yumi	X	X			X				
Total	20	17	11	8	5	10	8	3	2
%	83%	71%	46%	33%	21%	42%	33%	13%	8%

## APPENDIX P

### FREQUENCY TABLE – FINDING #3

RQ3: How do participants learn to overcome the challenges they faced in order to pursue their vision?

n=24

Participant	Formal	Informal			
	Attending courses, coaching, training	Through self reflection	Dialoguing with others	Learning from experience	Mentoring and role models
Aamori	X	X	X	X	X
Agatha	X	X	X	X	
Akira		X	X		
Arlette	X	X	X	X	
Belinda		X	X	X	
Charlotte	X		X	X	
Chloe		X	X		X
Claritta		X	X	X	
Dahab	X	X	X	X	X
Edina		X	X	X	X
Ekatarina	X	X	X	X	
Kristina		X		X	
Linda		X			X
Magdalena	X	X	X	X	X
Mandy	X	X	X	X	X
Nora	X	X	X		X
Penelope	X	X	X	X	
Reka	X	X		X	
Rose			X	X	
Saanvi	X	X	X	X	
Salome	X	X	X	X	
Sharon	X	X	X		
Sydney	X	X	X	X	
Yumi	X	X	X	X	
Total	16	22	21	19	8
%	67%	92%	88%	79%	33%



## APPENDIX Q

### FREQUENCY TABLE – FINDING #4

RQ4: What other factors helped and/or hindered participants in fulfilling their personal vision?

Participant	Helped							Hindered				
	A supportive community / a supportive family	Prior work experience	Having an execution strategy	Belief in self	Self-care practices	Having financial security	Spiritual Faith	Self-doubt	Unsupportive / unpleasant work environment	Financial strain	Leaving established work relationships	Overwhelming work/personal demands
Aamori	X	X		X		X		X				
Agatha	X	X	X					X				
Akira	X	X						X				X
Arlette	X					X						
Belinda	X	X	X	X								
Charlotte	X	X	X			X						X
Chloe	X	X	X									
Claritta	X	X	X	X								
Dahab	X	X			X				X	X		
Edina	X	X	X	X			X					
Ekatarina	X	X							X	X		
Kristina	X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X
Linda	X		X	X				X			X	
Magdalena	X		X		X		X		X			
Mandy	X	X	X									
Nora	X	X		X					X	X		X
Penelope	X							X	X	X	X	X
Reka	X		X		X				X	X		
Rose	X	X	X					X			X	
Saanvi	X				X	X		X	X			
Salome	X	X		X				X				
Sharon	X		X		X		X	X			X	
Sydney	X	X	X	X								
Yumi	X	X	X			X		X		X		
Total	24	17	15	8	5	5	3	11	8	7	5	5
%	100%	71%	63%	33%	21%	21%	13%	46%	33%	29%	21%	21%

## APPENDIX R

Evidence table showing how participants describe what led them to pursue their personal vision

<b>Category</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Comment / Behaviors</b>
Go-Getters	Mandy	Mandy explained that she had always wanted to own a farm with horses and be financially secure.
Go-Getters	Akira	Akira mentioned that from a young age, she always knew she would own her own business
Go-Getters	Claritta	Claritta spoke of her dream of relocating to Argentina
Seekers	Penelope	Penelope spoke of wanting to contribute and giving back to society and working with the younger generation
Seekers	Sydney	Sydney spoke about living more authentically and being true to herself and finding something that would motivate her again
Seekers	Sharon	Sharon had a series of potent and transformative experiences in communion with God that led her to realize that she wanted to coach individuals.
Explorers	Rose	Rose spoke of her daughter, diagnosed with Down's Syndrome changed her vision of her life and had her shift her focus to starting an inclusive school
Explorers	Saanvi	Saanvi was drawn to pursuing her vision after experiencing burnout
Explorers	Yumi	Yumi's vision was based on who she wanted to be as a professional and as a mother

## APPENDIX S

Evidence table showing variations in the groups' responses to self-doubt

Category	Name	Comments / Behaviors
Go-Getters	Claritta	Claritta shares that her mind was made up and that she kept her vision to herself - I knew they'd worry and then trying to talk me out of it and you can't talk me out of it. And I'm like, I don't want six months of argument because I'm doing it.
Go-Getters	Mandy	Mandy, faced with people telling her she had no idea what she was doing, remained confident in her decision - Lots of people like, "What the heck are you doing?" And my response is, "Well, somebody does this. Otherwise, we'd have no horse farms and we'd have no restaurants."
Seekers	Magdalena	Magdalena shared how self-doubt crept and she felt like a nobody in as she reflected on the consequence of leaving her her senior position at an organization - I was Head of Major Donors, then I became Magdalena, "nobody"
Seekers	Agatha	Agatha's main question in her new role as a coach was could she actually do it - My question was, will I be able to do it? And how effective I can be in selling, asking for money, not giving you it free anything, because it's important.
Explorers	Dahab	Dahab experienced the impostor syndrome and worried that no one would hire her - I mean, tremendous, tremendous, tremendous, tremendous fear and imposter syndrome. I really was very convinced that I will fail, that nobody would want to hire me.
Explorers	Saanvi	Saanvi expressed the need for external validation - It's like I needed people to say how wonderful and exceptional it was for me to dare to do it. I've always been told, I see you doing your own thing. External people validating that I am worthy, that I can do it, that I should do it, but me never daring to take that step and be like, "I'm going for it."

## APPENDIX T

Evidence table showing participant experiences related to the fear of the unknown:

Category	Name	Comments / Behaviors
Go-Getters	Edina	Edina found that the uncertainty of finances triggered a fear of the unknown - the financial aspect was the psychological impact of seeing money decrease every month with nothing coming in was very triggering. And so I think that in itself would occasionally create this fear of the unknown.
Seekers	Sydney	Sydney was fearful of the unknown not really knowing what to expect as a result of the transition - I think it's always really difficult and I was in the same situation. To make a transition like that without knowing where you're really going. So that vagueness, not really being clear what is that going to look like then? As much as the coaching supported me in that, there was still a lot of fear. And in my case it wasn't even financial.
Seekers	Sharon	Sharon felt that her challenge was the fear of the unknown which might ultimately not be better than her current situation – And then probably most importantly, the biggest obstacle of all, the fear of surrendering what I know for something better. Because what if it's really not better?
Explorers	Nora	Nora found herself fearful about starting her own business - I mean I had never started my own business before. And that was really scary to me. I was always solo on my own
Explorers	Linda	Linda shared that her fear was letting go - The first challenge that I encountered was letting go.
Explorers	Saanvi	Saanvi felt a lot of fear as well as her husbands in her decision to take the leap - I mean, resigning is a huge action, right? That's the biggest one. It wasn't just me resigning on my own. I had to speak to my husband about it. He had massive fears. He transmitted his fears to me.

## APPENDIX U

Evidence table showing the Seekers perception of their working identity:

Category	Name	Comments / Behaviors
Seekers	Sydney	Sydney found herself asking about stepping out of her identity into a new one and what that would be like to leave behind her existing identity. - I'm stepping out of this consciously, which has been my identity for so long and I don't know what the next one is going to be.
Seekers	Magdalena	Magdalena found herself having to flesh out a whole new identity as part of her transition process - it's very scary. You basically strip yourself out of everything that you had accomplished, like leaving that organization. I had a title, I became someone, I started very young there as an intern, and then I left as a head of a team. So, I had a full identity fleshed out, and then suddenly I was putting everything away.
Seekers	Sharon	Sharon grappled with not having her identity fleshed out as she stepped into her new venture - initially the whole identity thing. The first day that I wasn't going into the office, I remember looking out the window and I leaned over. It was a small town, but a relatively busy street and I saw everyone going to and fro, and I just had that moment of, "I have nowhere to go."
Seekers	Penelope	Penelope explained that she left with no profession and no business card and wandering who she was in this moment - That was probably a challenge, and it's a complete ... I had no profession; I had no business card that had a company name on it. It was just me. It was ... who is this? What are you doing? It's being bare. A blank piece of paper.
Seekers	Agatha	Agatha was unclear as to how to introduce herself publicly - I remember at the beginning, when I was thinking to someone asking me, what do you do in life? I was terrified because I didn't have my business card. And now the marketing director or whatever, or the brand of the company, it was just me, so, also, introducing myself, and that was a challenge for me, at the beginning.

## APPENDIX V

Evidence table of ways in which the groups learned through dialogue with others:

Category	Name	Comments / Behaviors
Go-Getters	Chloe	Chloe reached out to everyone in her network. I talked to everyone in my network. I went out to every banker woman and man I knew that were trusted advisors and said, "What do you think?" I had, I don't know, a dozen people that I trusted read my business plan and give me feedback. What was missing? What did I need? What did they think?
Go-Getters	Claritta	Claritta spoke with experts in the areas of expertise she was not familiar with - Talking to experts in the areas that aren't my area of expertise. So finance, tax, setting up a company, I had no idea of what type of company? What it means? What do you have to do from administration perspective?.
Seekers	Sydney	Sydney was looking to connect with people who could provide insights - I had about three buckets that I was pursuing. One was this coaching thing, another one had to do with travel because I had traveled internationally and had spent some years traveling professionally for Lufthansa, at the time. And as I was doing that, you try some things, you talk to others who do that. I just continued calling people and saying, "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?" Can you send me to someone else? Can you recommend a book?
Seekers	Magdalena	Magdalena's approach included speaking with friends and therapists - My friends, my mentor, my husband, my coach, my therapist
Explorers	Saanvi	Saanvi shared that she always dialogued with friends and interviewed them for insights - I always go to friends who've been through this and I interview them. How did it make you feel? What did you do? What are you doing now? What about your feelings now? What are your thoughts now? What would you have done differently? What did you do well? What would you recommend?
Explorers	Charlotte	Charlotte asked for introductions from her friends in the start up world - I asked a bunch of my friends who are also in the startup world to introduce me to some other people or to give me an hour to chat and simply to refine what I would call my marketing speech. Also, to brainstorm as to how I could somehow bridge the skills I had as a lawyer to the startup world

## APPENDIX W

Evidence table for variances in experiencing a transformative event

Category	Name	Comment / Behaviour
Go-Getters	Belinda	Belinda spoke of the moment she decided she was ready to act on her vision after having spent the weekend leaving a dinner party to redo a presentation as requested by her boss that turned it, did not need redoing - I had some dinner party and my former boss on a Saturday emails me and said we had to completely redo a presentation that was going on Monday and that I had to basically leave my dinner party to work on that, only to find out the next day that he took a second look and it was fine. So I was just done at that point. I just thought, what am I doing? Yeah. So that was kind of a, that was just a real annoying moment that broke the camel's back.
Go-Getters	Claritta	Claritta mentions that having to abide by nonsensical rules made her realize she was not willing to take it anymore - there was some really stupid things that happened. Just work related, it was Switzerland related. And it was when they were threatening me with criminal charges for leaving rubbish right next to the recycle bin that they'd taken a photo of in the night because the recycle bin, it was that. And then being told off by Swiss drivers when you're driving and there's a queue and you can go on the other lane, but they try and block you. I'm just like, "I can't live like this anymore."
Seekers	Agatha	Agatha's encounter with a coach helped her crystalize her vision - I met a coach. I met a person that was offering me to a very small collaboration, which was not even my aspiration or my final ideal type of work. But yes, it was something. I was fascinated by a person. And I said okay, why not? And I thought okay, then it's possible.
Seekers	Sydney	Sydney's vision was born from an encounter with a coach where she was able to solve for herself what she wanted - I realized, wow, there's something here that is exactly what I've been trying to solve myself and she was able to put it in such clear language about, "Well, if those things are missing that doesn't mean you necessarily have to find that yourself." And I had been going in circles to, "What was going on? Why am I not jumping out of bed with joy anymore?" So I would say she was absolutely the one that made that happen".
Seekers	Sharon	Sharon had a realization that pointed her to coach more intentionally - a transformational posture with expectations of herself, her clients and God
Explorers	Rose	Rose explains that her vision was born out of necessity – My vision was born out of necessity – having my daughter changed my vision
Explorers	Ekatarina	Ekatarina shared that her vision was one that evolved over the years - I think my vision evolved through the years
Seekers	Salome	Salome – sat on a bench and had a realization - the moment it happened, when I came closer to my vision, was I sat on a park bench next to a little German chapel, I was in Germany, and next to a little cemetery.